



Floating by TimeToFloat

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Summary: Too injured to hibernate, too weak to kill, Pennywise is left wounded and is in hiding until a curious outsider comes to Derry to seek IT out. She finds more than she ever imagined she would.

1. Exploring Derry

After what happened in Derry, the news spread about the town in every state, including Washington. There was so much talk about the events that the President had to release a statement saying that the children had made fake claims about seeing a 'demonic clown' and that the "missing" children were just being hid away by their parents, and that everything was carefully orchestrated to get tourists to improve the town's economy.

That settled a lot of rumors and eventually, majority of the people lost interest and moved to the next news story. But there was something supernaturally charming about the events that I had to visit the little town, so I packed two bags and I began my road trip to Derry.

When I arrive at dusk, a police officer and his barrier stops me.

"Excuse me, miss. Are you with the press?" he asks, shining his flashlight into the backseat of my car. The beam of light moves to my face and I squint my eyes, trying to think after being momentarily blinded.

"No, sir. I'm just a tourist," I offer him my most polite smile. The officer studies my expression carefully and with little hesitation, he waves me through. Another officer moves the wooden barrier aside, allowing me entrance inside the small town.

After a few more turns and one U-turn, I pull into a motel parking lot and then I locate the lobby. I show the owner my credit card and ID, and he vanishes in the back room to fetch my key. Waiting, I look at the papers pinned to the bulletin board on the wall. There are old 'missing children' flyers hanging up and underneath one of them, there's a drawing of a clown holding a balloon. One eye is colored blue and the other is colored gold, his smile wide and teeth sharp. Menacing.

"Here you go, miss," the voice makes me jump. The owner had returned with the key to my room and I take it with an apologetic look on my face, as if I was sorry for being caught off guard. As if I was sorry for being scared.

Settling into my room, I remove my makeup and I get into my pajamas. I lie back on my bed and then I turn the television on to watch the local news. *"He's real,"* a young boy speaks into a microphone. *"He said his name was 'Pennywise,' and he smiled a lot and he gave me a balloon and then...and then...I can't remember, mommy."*

The teary-eyed boy buries his face in his mother's stomach and she comforts him before turning to the reporters.

"I don't care what the President said, or any lawman or government official for that matter. I only care and believe what my boy told me. If he said that a clown kidnapped him, then I believe a clown kidnapped him. Just no proof, is all," she looks back down at her son, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

The camera refocuses on the reporter's face, and she talks about the President's response and the conspiracies that surround Derry and what happened to the children. Other parents are interviewed, and all of them swear that they had no idea what happened to their children or why they were found wandering out of the woods.

My eyes grow heavy and I think about that drawing in the lobby, but I've already forgotten some of its details. *Forgetting*. That seems to be happening a lot lately. Shaking my head, I turn the television off and then I fold the blanket over me, going to sleep.

The next morning, I'm eating breakfast in a small diner next to the motel and I'm looking at a map of Derry that's spread open in front of me. I rotate it, trying to find where I am and after a few confusing turns, I finally find where I am.

According to the map, the public library is only two blocks from here. Satisfied, I spend half an hour sipping my coffee and pushing my half-eaten pancakes around on my plate, waiting to become more alert. Come on, caffeine, do your thing.

Eventually, and as alert as I'll ever be, I start my walk to the library.

There, as I'm on the fourth step, I turn when I hear rustling in the bushes across the street. I pause, waiting to see what the source of the sound is, but there's nothing. *Nothing*. I turn away and then I

enter the library.

As I'm asked to sign their check-in book by the librarian, I see a list of books that have been recently checked out. All of them pertaining to Derry's history, some books about the supernatural.

"Excuse me," I gently touch another librarian on the arm as she passes me, and she pauses. *"Do you have any history books left?"*

"Are you another reporter?" she sighs wearily. *"Don't matter. Follow me."*

She fixes her glasses on her face and I follow her down the rows of books to a section way in the back. When we're in front of the sparse-looking shelf, she motions to it and then walks away.

"Thank...you," I murmur, certain that she wouldn't have cared either way if I verbalized my gratitude or not.

When I turn to see what's left, my eyebrows furrow, not too thrilled about the selection.

I pull a random book from the shelf, one out of few, and I sit at one of the tables in the corner. The spine cracks as the book opens and I can smell the leavings of the bugs that have been nibbling at its pages. Slowly, my index finger moves down the index page and then I flip to Page 89.

"Mysteries of Derry, Chapter 7," I whisper, almost immediately entranced.

And I begin to read.

A couple chapters in and a few hours pass, nothing breaks my attention until I hear people talking on the streets. Heads lift from their books and bodies move towards the entrance to see who those voices belong to.

"Stop badgering my son! We're leaving town for a few weeks until all of this nonsense blows over," an irate man is wagging his finger out his car window at a group of reporters and I crouch down to see the boy in the backseat, the sobbing mother in the passenger's seat. The boy has a distant look in his eyes as he stares at the handle of the door,

which I'm assuming is what he's looking at.

The car speeds away and the herd of reporters disperse. One of them bumps into me, causing me to drop my book. He flicks his hat back before he bends down to pick it up and then he hands it to me.

"I'm sorry about that, miss," he smiles and then he presses my book into my open hand. *"Are you another reporter too?"*

"You're the third person to ask me that," I answer, slightly annoyed by the repetition. Nothing about me says 'reporter.' Not my clothes, not my demeanor. Nothing. But I can't be mad if that's what the people here are used to seeing, especially with everything going on lately.

"I didn't mean to offend you, but I saw the book in your hand," he motions to it. *"You heard about what happened, I assume."*

I slowly nod my head and he pauses for a moment before he reaches for a stack of papers in his bag. He hands them to me and I look at him, baffled.

"I've read every book in there and I've interviewed a few people, and I already sent the information to my people back in New Jersey. This should save you some time if curious is what you are," he smiles again and he tips his hat before he walks to his car across the street near the river. I watch him drive away before I head back to my motel room to read everything he gave me.

Emerging from a hot shower, dressed in pajamas, I sit at the desk and I spread the papers out before me. I pick one at random and then I begin reading it. It's an interview of one of the boys that was taken. He talks about seeing bright lights and...a clown. I shuffle the papers and one of them falls over the edge of the desk, drifting in a sawing motion through the air. I freeze until it lands, rather not to look like a fool trying to catch it mid-fall and then I slowly reach down to pick the paper off the floor.

It's a detailed drawing of a clown, *the* clown, of the monster that has been allegedly eating the children of Derry. Well, not all of them. Some managed to escape from the clown's dead lights, they claimed. My eyes fixate on the simple but detailed drawing. The creature is

dressed in an off-white clown suit with red pompoms as buttons, fire-like hair, two red lines on his face. And the clown has blue eyes with a hint of orange, like the drawing that I saw in the lobby.

I turn the paper over, curious to see if the artist left their mark, and written on the bottom is the name *Stan Uris*. I've read or heard that name before, but I can't remember on which paper. I suppose it doesn't matter. I flip the drawing over again and then I stare at the picture until my vision blurs. Exhausted, I reach back to turn the light off and then I move from the chair to the bed, going to sleep.

Asleep, I'm having a dream of walking in the woods, but something is off. No birds singing, no bugs crawling in the dirt, no deer nuzzling the soft patches of grass and no fish flicking their tails in the water. No sign of wildlife or life in general.

There's a white flash, something I imagined what the children saw before they forgot, and suddenly I'm somewhere else. I'm standing ankle-deep in a stream, staring at a patch of darkness. Perhaps a cave or some abandoned tunnel. I have no idea what it is or where I am, but my body tells me that I've been here before or I'm familiar with it. No sense of being lost or out of place, no panic. Just curiosity.

My eyes open and it's the next day, another day in Derry.

It's the same kind of morning. I walk to the diner to eat breakfast and then I'm back in my motel room to read more of the notes that the reporter gave me. More interviews, more vague descriptions, more drawings of the same clown but slightly different as interpretation should be. The wonder almost loses its color when I come across the same location again.

It's a place called the Barrens.

Curious, I pull out the map of Derry and then I try to locate the Barrens. My fingertip moves over the lines, the patches of green and blue. Nothing. There is nothing on this map with that name. I fold the map together and I look at its cover for the date that this map was published. It was this year, which means that it's been updated.

"This doesn't make any sense," I whisper to the empty room.

Unrelenting, I grab my backpack and then I head to the diner to ask one or two locals if they can help me locate the Barrens. Surely it must be on this map somewhere, but I'm just overlooking it.

When I arrive at the diner, it's mid-afternoon and there aren't that many people here. Two portly men eating lobster rolls at a table, two women sipping coffee together at another table, one old man sitting by himself at the counter and a family of three in the booth.

I head for the old man sitting by himself at the counter, assuming he's lived here his whole life. He must know where the Barrens is located or what its real name is because too many children have mentioned it for it to be a coincidence. Surely the people in this town must know of it.

"Excuse me, sir," I lightly touch him on the shoulder and he turns in his stool, giving me a once over.

"Can I help you with something?" he raises a shaggy eyebrow and then I nod my head before I pull out the map. When I tell him what I want him to find, the two women behind us stop talking and then they direct their attention on me.

"Don't, miss," one of the women says, her face pale and sickly looking. *"You don't want to go there. That place is haunted and that place is full of sickness and sadness. You will find the dead bodies there. Bones. Lots of them. Bones of little children, of my little girl."*

She stands up from the table, posturing.

"Did you come here to take pictures for your newspaper? Did you come here to open wounds that have never been healed shut? Why are you people here?" her voice is escalating and then her friend tosses money on the table before she pulls the woman towards the door, begging her to calm down.

They leave and my body slightly shakes, not from sorrow or anger or shock, but adrenaline. This, this is the reason I wanted to come to Derry.

The others stare and then they slowly go back to their business.

"Are you sure you want to go there, miss? You probably won't make it far because I think the police still have sections of that place blocked off to the public," the old man sighs, not caring about stories anymore, regardless of whether they're true or false.

"Nope, police have better things to do than to stand around and look for something that isn't there," the man behind the counter speaks without looking up as he wipes crumbs of food away with his rag.

The old man blinks at me and then he shrugs his shoulders, *"suit yourself."*

He taps an area on the map that isn't marked at all. He explains that the place is called the Barrens because it's, well, barren. He goes on to mention that there's a gravel pit, many sewer pump-stations and a landfill that's located in the area.

I'm folding up the map and then the man behind the counter looks at me with a contemplative look on his face, *"you know, most folks that come here want to see the house at the end of Neibolt Street, not the Barrens."*

"Neibolt Street" I look at him, returning the expression. *"Why are people so interested in that street?"*

Obviously, I haven't done enough reading. The cook explains why the street and the house on it has been such an attraction lately and he takes my map to show me where it is. He marks it with a pen and then he hands the map back to me.

"Thank you, and I'm sorry to have disturbed some of your customers. I'm just very curious about everything that's been happening in this town. I didn't come here to disrespect anyone," I politely bow my head to thank the two men before I turn to leave and then I begin to make my way to Neibolt Street.

According to my watch, it's taken me over an hour to reach the street, but I'm finally here. Catching my breath, I sit on the sidewalk underneath the shade of a tree and I rest my hands on the cool cement. Across the street, I notice that the storm drain has been covered by sandbags. I've noticed other storm drains have been

closed off on my way here too.

I remember the things that I read in the interviews, and I understand why. Taking a deep breath and wiping the sweat from my brow, I adjust my backpack and then I make my way towards the house.

The house itself looks decades old. There are two rusty and tilted 'no trespassing' signs on the front gate, and there's one leafless tree in the yard. Vines cling lifelessly to the structure, most of the windows are boarded up, and there's 'caution' tape wrapped around the entrance.

No one is in sight. No police officers, no cars. Nothing.

I stand in front of the bright tape, wondering whether I should enter the house.

What's stopping me? I came here to engulf myself in this town of mysteries and now that I'm close to finding something, I just can't seem to step beyond those tapes. Fear is one of the logical things that's stopping me. Uncertainty, possible injury and possible jail-time for trespassing are others.

I close my eyes, telling myself to turn it off.

Be fearless. *Be fearless.* ***Be fearless.***

I open my eyes and then I run through the caution tape, down the dirt path and up the dusty steps inside the house.

2. Down the Well

Inside of the house, I cover my nose and mouth with my hand out of instinct because I can almost see the specks of dust and mold in the air, but I know that I can't walk around here like this forever. I take a small but deep breath, and I lower my hand from my face.

There are dead vines hanging from the corners of the ceiling, an old piano with broken keys and dried leaves on the floor. There's a staircase that doesn't look friendly to weight, so I wander down the hallway to look at my options. Part of me dislikes that there are so many to choose from.

I shrug my backpack off my shoulders and then I retrieve my water bottle to take a few gulps from it, suddenly feeling dehydrated from the long walk. I glance around with the bottle to my lips, certain that something will jump out at me because that's what happens in abandoned houses like this, right? But there's nothing.

I lower the bottle, underwhelmed with the sensation that I'm too hopeful for everything to be true. Part of me thinks that I should feel terrible for thinking like that because according to some interviews and stories, many people have died due to mysterious circumstances. Many coroners have left this little town without saying why, police officers have retired early or asked for a transfer. There have been too many unexplained deaths and disappearances in Derry for all of it to have been a fabrication.

Determined to find the truth in these possible lies, I venture bravely through the house to find something that will ring a bell.

I find the kitchen and the fridge is overturned, the table broken. I turn in a slow circle and then my eyes fall on the floor where I see footprints. Small footprints and footprints that appear much larger.

I'm not a detective, but there's no mistaking the obvious that people were here in this room recently. I place my foot beside the smaller footprint, recognizing that a young child must have left it and then I place my foot beside the larger footprint, not sure who or what could have left that.

My eyes sharpen when I remember the drawings of the clown, focusing more on his attire than anything else. His tattered suit, his fluffy pompom buttons and his large...shoes.

No, no. Anyone could slip on clown shoes and parade around in them. There's no substantial proof here, no signs of the supernatural. And then there's that nagging feeling of hopelessness again, the idea that I've wasted my summer break because I wanted to chase something that wasn't even real.

I smear the footprint with my foot and then I walk inside the next room and then the next room and then the next room. When I make my way around one of the walls, there's an open doorway. I stare into the darkness, wondering if anything is staring back at me.

I can feel...something. It's that soft pressure that you feel on your body when you suspect that someone is looking at you, but you don't know for sure until you look around. It's called the 'psychic staring effect.'

What slightly unnerves me is that I'm usually right about the feeling.

I take a step back from the doorway and I remove my backpack to find my flashlight. I face it towards the darkness and I wait for my hand to stop shaking before I turn it on.

Oh, who am I kidding? My hand can't stop shaking.

Despite my fear, I turn the flashlight on and it reveals nothing but a staircase. My shoulders relax and I blink a few times, not even realizing that I was too afraid to blink in fear that if I did, something was going to jump out at me.

"Okay," I tell myself. The hard part is over, which was entering the house in the first place, so exploring it is no big deal. It's just one step after the other. I take a deep breath before I descend the stairs to the basement and then I start walking into the darkness with nothing but a beam of light.

When I reach the last step, I stand on it as I shine the flashlight around the dark basement. There are lifting hooks hanging from the

ceiling, blocks of cement and...a well. I can feel my hands start to sweat, so I wipe my left palm on my side before I switch the flashlight to that hand. And then my expression hardens as I think, seemingly out of nowhere like it always does.

I need to stop being afraid. Everything that has caused me to be afraid were things that I imagined. Nothing about what I thought has come true yet. This is an abandoned house and I haven't heard anything out of the ordinary yet, not even the squeak of a mouse. There's no reason that I should be afraid, no reason that I can see with my eyes.

The block of ice that has been forming in my stomach slightly melts and I feel better, better enough to approach the well.

Upon closer inspection, I peer inside and the beam of light falls all the way down to somewhere where my vision can't follow. I look up at one of the lifting hooks, the long rope that hangs from it, and I loop it around the hook in a fashion that it tightly hugs it. I shine the flashlight into the well again, trying to see if there's a tunnel where I can slip into.

And I see one.

Carefully, I wrap the rope around my waist and I tie it there, and to make sure the hook is stable, I tug on it as hard as I can with my body weight only to see that it holds. With a few deep breaths, I swing my legs over the rim of the well and then I slowly lure myself down to the opening. When my feet touch its edge, I use the bottom of my shoes to scoot myself into it before I loosen the rope to lower my backside on its floor.

I untie the rope from my waist and then I let it dangle before I stick my flashlight in my mouth. I keep my chin straight as I crawl through the tunnel and then I come to a point where I can either go left or right. I lean into the right tunnel only to see that it's closed off by a gate, so I crawl into the left tunnel.

Before I make another turn, I reach behind me to unzip the outer pocket of my backpack. I grab my tube of lipstick and then I draw an arrow on the wall, so that I don't get lost. I continue, crawling and

taking random turns, marking the walls as I go.

The deeper I crawl, the louder the sound of rushing water is. I follow the noise, using it as my dead end before I must turn around. I only have so much lipstick left before I run out. It's already going to be an unpleasant walk back to the motel because it's going to be night by the time I leave the house.

But I've already left it, haven't I?

Mercifully, after a few more turns, I find the end of the tunnel and I can see water pouring into a reservoir that I can't see. I crawl to the edge and then I see a slope. I wiggle around, getting my feet in front of me and then I step out of the tunnel to stretch my legs and arms.

I brace my hands on my knees, hunching over to stretch my spine. I didn't realize how out of shape I was, but then again, they don't train you to crawl through tunnels at any gym. I straighten up to watch the water vanish into something below the reservoir and then I stagger to the base where the ground is flat.

"He thrusts his fists against the posts," a voice drifts out of a dark tunnel, one with no light.

My pupils dilate when I hear the voice and then I slowly turn to where I heard it. I'm afraid to speak because I'm afraid that I'll get an answer, but maybe I'm overthinking things again. I couldn't be the first tourist to stumble upon the house or to be the first one to venture down here.

"Hello?" I respond with an upward inflection.

There's a pause, nothing but the sound of rushing water and my heart pounding so loud that I can hear it in my ears.

"And still insists he sees the ghosts," the voice continues the poem and then there's an echoing laugh, like the voice somehow grew legs and could run around the walls in a circle.

Then I see it.

A white glove emerges from the darkness and then a forearm and

then...a clown.

I can't see my face, but I can feel all the color drain from it. I drop the flashlight on the ground and then I begin to walk backwards. My heel catches on a slab of cement, which causes me to fall and land on my backside. I'm too paralyzed with fear to crawl away, too paralyzed to speak.

The clown deeply inhales, smelling the air and then he laughs.

"Where were you when I needed you?" he asks, not expecting me to answer.

Frankly, I don't want to, but I swallow hard, and I open and close my hands to remind myself to be present, to not let anything paralyze me to the point that it costs me my life. I've always believed that if I die, I should die fighting.

I take a few quick breaths and then I rise to my feet, practically digging my heels into the ground.

"I don't know who you think you are, but scaring people with that makeup isn't funny," I take a few more quick breaths, gaining my strength back with each inhale. This clown is just a clown, nothing more. They must have hired someone to stay in this place until some unfortunate person found their way here. This must be a gimmick of some kind, like the President announced. My anger gives me power and my fear diminishes even more.

Losing my fear, the clown loses his power and he scoots back into the darkness where he cowers. I come closer to the dark tunnel, feeling as though I've grown ten more inches since I stood up from falling.

"You need to stop this. People are scared and I don't care how poor this town is, that's no excuse to use..." something falls out of the tunnel and into the puddle with a splash. It makes me forget what I was saying when I look down at it.

It's what appears to be a half-eaten body.

"Oh, that's really scary," I say with attitude. I step closer to body and I nudge it with my foot. *"Okay, it looks real, I'll give you that. It even*

smells re..."

I blink down at the prop and it slowly dawns on me that this isn't a prop. This half-eaten body is fucking real.

"*Oh, my God,*" I whisper as I lift my hand to my mouth. The smell of blood is undeniable because nothing can replicate that metallic scent, especially human blood.

The clown leans out of the darkness, smiling and shaking for a reason that I'm unaware of.

"*You should come closer. Yes, yes, come closer,*" he laughs with twinkling eyes and then he lets out an inhuman roar before he grabs for me. It's a short-lived attack, though, because he whimpers and leans back into the darkness.

Think. *Think.*

"*You're injured, aren't you?*" my eyes narrow and my voice soft, almost in concern. "*I know about you, Pennywise.*"

The heavy breathing in the tunnel stops and then I hear movement. Even though it's dark, I can still see his eyes. I don't know how, but I can. Maybe the dead lights are inside of him.

"*Believe it or not, but I'm not going to hurt you. I just came to Derry out of curiosity and I didn't know what I'd find, actually, but seeing you...*" I trail off, not knowing how to finish that sentence because I haven't forgotten who I'm talking to. What I'm talking to.

This clown, this creature killed children and even some adults. The half-eaten corpse is a cold fact of what my reality is now, but I searched for it. No one else is to blame for what will happen to me.

Maybe something doesn't need to happen to me.

"*Come into the light,*" I take a few steps back to give the clown room and to show him that I mean him no harm.

The clown simply breaths, staring at me with his unnatural blue eyes. Slowly and weakly, he pulls himself out of the tunnel and then he

collapses on the corpse he pushed out. He uses the palm of his hand to drag himself to the where my flashlight is facing when I dropped it and then he looks up at me.

He sees me and I see him.

I have dark brown hair that sways a few inches below my shoulders and my eyes are almond shaped, like most Japanese-American's eyes are. My eyes are dark brown too, and I stand no taller than five-feet, four-inches.

"I was bested by those kids," he scowls, but then his voice lightens. *"They tried to destroy me, but I managed to slip away."* His laugh is maniacal and he continues, smile fading, *"They did destroy me. I'm too injured to sleep, too weak to kill. Finish me, human, and return to your kind a hero."*

Hearing his words stirs something inside of me and I feel an odd sense of remorse for this creature. After reading about some of the things he's done, I should be grateful that he's dying.

But I don't.

Foolishly but bravely, I slowly approach him and I touch the side of his injured head. He makes a sound that's a mixture of a whimper and a growl, and I can feel him coil under my palm.

"Why humans? Why children?" I ask him the questions that I'm sure none of the others thought to ask before he ate them.

And then it happens quicker than I can imagine. He grabs my wrist and then he grabs my other wrist, pinning me on my back. Whatever strength he had left, he's using it now.

"Don't, Pennywise! Don't!" I plead with him, kicking my legs to get free.

Slowly, he opens his mouth to expose his rows of sharp teeth and it's horrific, like the mouth of a shark. His drool drips on my cheek and his breath carries the scent of rotting flesh.

"I can get you more kids!" I blurt out and he retracts his teeth, slightly

closing his mouth. Now is my chance to speak my way out of being eaten. *"I'm...I'm a teacher. School begins in a few more days and I bet if I call my school back home, I can easily transfer here for good. I can...I can get you as many children as you want!"*

He softly laughs, moving his hands to my neck and he gives me a good squeeze.

"You feed off their fears, right? You must be able to read minds to some extent then, so read my mind and try to find the lie there," I stare into his eyes and they're orange now.

Pennywise sniffs my face, searching for the lie, and, oh my God: I'm telling the truth.

"Why? Why would you help me? I kill and eat your kind. Your kind is filth, less, but I eat you because there is nothing else that can satisfy my hunger," he squeezes my neck a little tighter and I blink my eyes when the pressure builds.

"I don't...I don't know," and I truly don't. A part of me is fighting the urge to dismiss what I'm feeling right now. It's sickening on a mental level, something that I wish I didn't have because it's so bizarre. God, I can't even think it because if I do, the clown might read it in my eyes.

And it's too late.

His growl softens as he looks down into my eyes and then he pushes me away in disgust, almost certain that he must have read me wrong because he's injured. No human, or prey for that matter, has managed to injure him this badly before.

I touch my neck, leaning up from the ground as I catch my breath. Did I just say that I'd give him children to eat?

"You," he wags his finger at me, still certain that his senses are off. He couldn't have seen what he saw when he looked in my eyes. *"I must feed soon, or I will die. Sooner than a few days. Tomorrow. I'll need a child by tomorrow. And if you don't find me one..."*

He can't finish the threat because he knows that he doesn't possess

the strength to follow it through, not anymore. Not now, at least. Instead, he growls and tucks his arms against his chest, leaning even more into the darkness.

I crouch to pick my flashlight up and then I make my way to the slope to navigate my way through the tunnels again.

"*Wait*," his voice is hollow, weak. I turn to look at the tunnel and then he points to a much larger tunnel at the opposite side of the reservoir, "*Take that way. It will lead you to the Barrens.*"

I bow my head in thanks and then I walk over to the tunnel, which is several feet taller than me. This will beat having to crawl through that maze again. I turn to look at him, almost able to see his glowing eyes even from this far.

"*I promise I'll be back and I won't tell anyone what I saw here*," the words that come out of my mouth make my stomach feel heavy, but my head is clear. With one lingering look, I run into the tunnel to find my way out.

When I feel the warm breeze of night, I follow the fresh smell and then I burst into the moonlight, thrilled to be surrounded by nature again. I drop to my knees to take a drink of the stream and I splash some on my face and neck, and after a few moments with my head down, I brace my hand on my knee to stand. I tuck my thumbs under the straps of my backpack and then I look around me, seeing the moon through a thin veil of clouds. The rest of the sky clear, full of blinking stars and satellites.

My senses are coming back to me and then I look down to see that my feet are submerged in water, ankle-deep. It automatically reminds me of my dream, so I turn around to see the place where I burst out of.

There it is, the cave. The tunnel that I saw in my dream, only it was day and not night.

My skin prickles, and I suddenly feel like everything is right, that everything is happening the way that it's supposed to be. I look up at the stars again, thinking about destinies and coincidences and ghosts

and everything else that our limited minds are unable to even imagine.

The unknown.

Is that what he is? Is that what makes him truly scary? What **is** he?

A little lightheaded with all these thoughts, I make my way through the woods and I think about what I saw. I saw Pennywise the Dancing Clown, the monster that ate children and he almost ate me. I close my eyes for a moment, walking slower so that I don't trip, and I push away the tingle that disturbs my stomach.

Something isn't just wrong with Derry. Something is *very* wrong with me, or that's how it feels. I shake my head, distracting myself with other thoughts, like how I'm supposed to give Pennywise a child to eat. How could I have said that to him? I can't kill a child to save his life, but then I don't want him to die either. It's a no-win situation.

But I made a promise to him that I'd be back, that I wouldn't tell anyone about what I saw down there. No, I must keep my word.

3. The Beginning

I don't eat breakfast in the diner today. Instead, I spend my morning in the public library typing an email to the school back home, telling them that I'm grateful for all the years that I've spent at their school, teaching their students, but that I believed that I was needed elsewhere. I make sure to apologize more than once about the short-notice, too, but I know that they won't have trouble finding someone to replace me. There are many people that are interested in becoming teachers.

After leaving the library and returning the books that I borrowed, I walk to the school and then I knock on the doors, wondering if anyone will be able to let me inside. Waiting, I smooth my skirt down and I make sure the buttons of my blouse are still centered. I don't have any of my details, not even a resume. I don't know how the principle will react to me or if there are any positions open, but this town isn't like the city. After hearing how many people left after what happened, I'm sure there are more than a few teaching positions open. Anything that will allow me to be around children.

For him. For *it*.

The door opens and a janitor looks me over, shifting the handle of his broom from one hand to the other.

"*Sorry, miss. School is closed,*" his keys jingle as he moves to close the door, but then I put my hand on it.

"*I understand, but I'm hoping to see the principle. I'm new in town, and I was wondering if I would be able to find a teaching position here. I'm from New York,*" I smile without showing my teeth and the man mumbles something under his breath before he widens the door to allow me inside.

He points to the principal's office and then I stand in front of the door, listening to the sounds coming from inside. I hear a song playing on the radio and I knock on the door, hoping that I knocked loud enough that the principle heard me.

No, he didn't, so I quietly open the door to see the principle sitting on the edge of his desk with his back to me and he's bobbing his head along to 'Devil Inside' by INXS. I curl my lips into my mouth, trying not to laugh as I reach out to tap him on the shoulder.

His pencil goes flying out of his hand and he turns around to look at me.

"*You scared me,*" he touches his chest to calm his heart and then he reaches back to turn the radio off. I shut the door behind me and I sit down on the chair in front of his desk as he moves to sit down in his. "*What can I do for you?*"

"*Good morning, sir. My name is Tsugi and I'm from New York. I recently heard what had happened here in Derry, so I wanted to see if I could fill any teaching positions in your school that may have opened up,*" I shrug my shoulders. "*I wish I could give you a resume, but I can assure you that I'm extremely quali...*"

"*You're hired,*" he blinks at me. "*I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you, but I've heard that there are amazing teachers in New York. We could use a little city toughness here in our little town, and I'm sorry that you had to hear about what happened. We did lose a lot of people and four of our teachers quit because it got to be too much for them. But something tells me that you'll be able to handle it.*"

I blink back at him, a little surprised that it was going to be this easy. His last comment almost forces a blush on my cheeks, but he wouldn't know why. I can't tell anyone why.

"*And you do realize that we won't be able to pay you as much as they did back in New York, right? I wish we could, but with the town as poor as it is and with so many teachers and families moving away, the school needs to save as much money as it possibly can to make sure that we don't lose anyone else,*" he continues to explain how the past of Derry changes its present, and how it might change its future. I listen with a concerned expression on my face until he finds a moment to pause and reflect.

"*I completely understand. I'm financially stable and I know that I'm over-qualified for this position, but I want to be here. It's not about the*

paycheck, but the children," I smile at the principle, trying to seem as excited as possible without coming off inauthentic.

He gives me papers to sign and forms to fill out, but when it gets to where I live, I pause.

"Would it be alright if I leave this blank for now? I actually haven't found a home to buy yet, but from the sound of it, I'll be able to have my pick," I fold the forms, but I hand him the one that just needed my signature and today's date. He nods his head in understanding and after shaking hands, I walk out of the school and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I look to the left, knowing that my motel room is waiting for me, but it's already afternoon and I remember the promise that I made Pennywise. I promised him that I was going to come back.

But I need something first. *Someone.*

I'm in downtown, searching for a clothing shop with decent clothes. There are pharmacies, antique shops, furniture shops, diners, restaurants, parks and bars. I came across one clothing shop, but it was plagued with the older crowd. Nothing in there would look good on me. I continue my search until I peer into the window of a clothing store that I haven't passed yet, and it looks like it's filled with decent and fashionable clothes.

The bell rings as I step inside and I comb my fingers through my hair before I look around.

"Good afternoon, miss. Everything you see on that rack is half-off and if you're looking for anything in particular, you can find me behind the counter and I'll help you find it," she smiles at me before she turns back to placing shoeboxes on the shelf.

I smile in return before I wander over to see what's on sale. There are designer dresses here, things that would cost a lot in New York. For a second, I wonder why these items are here, but then I remember how much Derry is struggling. I take a dress and I walk over to the back to slip into one of the dressing rooms to try it on. It's short and sparkly, and it's low-cut. It's something that I wouldn't normally wear, not even on a date.

I grew up being taught what modesty meant and I never desired the attention of others or wanted to be liked by anyone because of the trouble and regret it led to. I had myself and that was all that I really needed. There was little to no drama, no regrets made and not that many bad memories to look back on. I've always lived a careful and sensible life, only because I spent my childhood watching others make the mistakes, so I wouldn't have to make them myself. I just absorbed the lesson without dealing with the actual consequences.

The weight of what I'm doing and what I'm about to do has sunken into my bones. There's no cute way of describing it and there's no putting it lightly. I look at my reflection in the dressing room's mirror and I take a deep breath.

I'm about to lure a child to his death and I'm going to feed him to a monster that has already killed hundreds of children.

I guess that makes me a monster, too.

But I don't want to kill just anyone. I'm going to find children that are cruel, cruel children that throw rocks at stray cats or children that steal or children that bully others on the playground. I'm going to make Derry a better place by making sure that all that is evil and human will be destroyed by something that is evil and inhuman.

I remove my skirt and blouse, and I place it on the stool in the corner. I remove the dress from the hanger and then I slowly pull it up my body with its straps. My hand moves behind me to zip the dress up and then I tug it down before I straighten up. I touch my stomach, turning to the side to see if it accentuates my curves. It's perfect.

Exiting the dressing room in the dress, I pull the tag off and I stand near the cash register. The woman moves away from the shoeboxes and she fixes her glasses on her face before she looks at me.

"Why, don't you look beautiful, miss. Do you have a hot date tonight?" I slide her the price-tag.

"That's what I'm hoping for," I answer her quickly before pointing at the counter. *"I know this dress is on sale, but I'd like to pay the full price*

for it, if you don't mind."

I explain that I understand how difficult things have been lately and that I recently moved here from New York. I tell her that my mother was a pharmacist and that before she passed away, she left me everything that she saved, including a very rare painting that she wanted me to do whatever I wanted with it. I sold it to the art museum in New York and they paid me extremely well for it. As for my father, he left us for another woman when I was a teenager and I haven't spoken to him since. I don't like traitors, family or not.

She accepts my offer gratefully and she even gives me a hug before I leave. I'm out the door and then I stand on the sidewalk, catching glances from both men and women that walk by me. I slip the straps of my plastic bag over my wrist and then I walk to the park to see if there are any children playing there.

There are two children on the swings, but their mothers are there. There's no way that I'd be able to lure them away, especially not after what happened. I'm sure everyone is still on high-alert.

But in the corner of the park, there's a group of four boys smoking cigarettes and laughing about something. I don't look at them as I move closer, pretending to be interested in something else.

"He's such a loser. His dad has a limp from some fishing boat accident and he walks around town like this," the tallest boy hands his cigarette to his friend, walking in circles with a mock limp while the others laugh and cheer him on.

Bingo.

Still, I wait and listen to how the others react, even though I'm someone that believes in guilt by association. You choose who your friends with and if your friends with someone that mocks someone that's handicapped, then you tolerate what they're saying. You support what they're saying by laughing and cheering him on. The words might as well have come out of their mouths too.

Peer-pressure is an excuse to do bad things, to be bad people, to make bad choices and to be cowards, and it gives you the power to

blame other people on what you chose to do.

I pause in my thoughts, remembering how I felt before I met Pennywise, before I came to Derry. I was scared, I was uncertain, I was nervous. But now, I feel like I have a fever and it doesn't feel unpleasant. I feel powerful and dark, and I feel like I can do this. I feel like I can commit these horrible crimes.

I guess Pennywise isn't the only monster in Derry now.

One of them looks in my direction and I smirk. He taps his friend on the elbow and he nods at me. They turn their heads, blowing smoke out of their mouths. I walk towards them, dragging my fingertips on the fence to make it rattle and then I take the cigarette from the shortest boy. I slip the cylinder between my red lips to breathe it in and then I blow out a ring of smoke.

I hand the cigarette back to the boy, lipstick stain and all.

"*You guys are cute,*" I reach out to pinch one of them on the cheek and they hesitantly laugh, not knowing how to respond. Of course, they don't. Their bodies are still developing while the world forces them to act like adults.

"*Haven't seen you around here before. You in high school or something?*" the tallest boy addresses me, the same boy that was laughing about a man's handicap only moments ago.

"*I'm twenty-seven, actually, but thanks for the compliment,*" I tuck a dark lock of hair behind my ear and then I trace the underside of my lip to make sure my lipstick stays perfect.

"*That dress looks really nice on you.*"

"*Yeah.*"

"*You wanna hang out with us?*" the 'leader' of the group addresses me again and then I slowly smile at him.

The mothers across the park whisper to each other and then they get off the bench to collect their children from the swing, put-off by our smoking and loud conversation. I watch them leave and then I place

my hand on the young boy's chest.

"Sure, I have a place we can hang-out," I slide my hand down to his stomach and then I turn to walk off behind the buildings, knowing that they're going to do whatever I tell them to do because I'm an older, exotic female and older doesn't mean bad. Not here, not with boys that are eager to even see a girl's bra-strap slip out of her sleeve during PE.

This is going to be easy, but at the same time, I hate that I must to lure them using this method. I have absolutely no interest in them. I'm interested in something much older, even older than I am, and much darker.

We walk and walk, while the leader of the group falls into step beside me.

"I can carry that for you," he points to the plastic bag dangling on my wrist.

"Aren't you sweet," I tug the bag off my arm and then I hand it for him to hold. *"You and your friends live here, right? Have you ever been to the Barrens before?"*

He nods his head and his friends nod their heads too.

"That's where I'm going to take you, but that's not where we're staying," I talk as I walk, and the boys hurry along, eager to keep up with me. *"Have you ever been through that large tunnel? I was wandering the woods, taking pictures of the plants when I stumbled upon it and it looked interesting. I wanted to go in there to see if I could take some underground shots, but I lost my nerve. I'd love it if I had four strong boys to be my guides in there."*

One of the boys behind me stops dead in his tracks.

"Dudes, I can't go in there," the tallest boy stops and turns to his friend.

"Are you serious? You're just gonna wimp out just like that?" he shakes his head and then he waves his friend off. *"Fine. It can just be the four of us then."*

I feel like I've just made an error. I can't let any of these boys' stray from where we're going because whoever does follow me will go missing and whoever doesn't come will be questioned and then everything will fall apart.

"If you all come with me, I'll let you do anything you want to me," that causes all four of their heads to turn and their eyes are unblinking. *"I know you heard the rumors about what happened, but do you really believe that?"*

His friends tug on his sleeves, urging him to continue following me and with slight hesitation, he does. I turn on my heel before I take a deep breath and then I continue leading them to what will be their final resting place.

We're close, so close, and all I can wonder is if Pennywise is still alive. He said 'tomorrow,' but he didn't specify when. I just hope it's not too late because I will have put myself in danger. These boys are boys, but there are four of them.

When we walk into the tunnel, I look around like I haven't been here before. Halfway through, I remove my footwear and then I stick it in the plastic bag. I managed to prevent my heels from sticking into the ground, but I don't think I can avoid that here. I'd either fall or twist my ankle, maybe both.

"Do you guys hear that?" I ask, leading them closer to the reservoir where I know he is. If he has any strength left, he should already know we're here.

There are piles of trash here and there, some covered with slime and others covered with droplets of water and others covered with rust. I stare at the dark tunnel, the one that he was in and I see no glowing eyes looking back at me.

"I need to take a piss," one of the boys announce as he wanders down a smaller tunnel to do his business. I walk farther to the dark tunnel across the way and I stare hard into it, searching the darkness for what was there earlier.

I feel a hand on my arm and a voice on my shoulder.

"About what you said earlier..." the taller boy begins, but he doesn't have time to finish.

A scream echoes out from the tunnel and everyone, including me, whips around to see what happened to the boy that wandered off.

"Dean?" the boy beside me calls out to his friend. *"Come on, quit playing, man! This isn't funny!"*

There's no response. The only thing I can hear is the rushing water. The three remaining boys glance at each other and they shrug in-sync.

"He's probably playing a joke. Go in there and get him, Mick," the leader motions for his friend to go into the tunnel and I bite my lip in anticipation, barely able to breathe because of it.

Pennywise is still alive.

Mick hesitantly walks into the tunnel a step at a time and we can faintly hear him call out for his missing friend and then we wait. The boy beside me and the boy across the reservoir has no idea what's about to happen, but they're going to find out soon. I almost feel sorry for them.

Almost.

Now Dean and Mick are gone. The two boys that remain approach the tunnel and then they argue back and forth who's going to be the one to go in there after their friends.

"We'll do 'Rock, Paper, Scissors.' Two out of three wins and the loser has to go in there," the tall boy holds out his hand and his friend mirrors his movement. Their fists bob up and down and out of nowhere, a severed hand falls between them.

We all look up to see Pennywise gnawing into Dean's shoulder and he smiles, blood dripping from his mouth.

"Rock, I win!" he exclaims, dropping the boy's body to the ground. The two remaining boys scream and one of them runs down the tunnel that we came from, trying to escape, but Pennywise swoops in and

breaks his legs in two quick blows.

The tall boy panics and he's trying to get something from out of his pocket and he pulls out a pocketknife and I glance from him to the tunnel as the monster emerges.

"Be careful, he has a knife!" I call out, warning Pennywise of the potential danger and then he smiles, slowly making his way to the remaining boy like he has all the time in the world. But as he taunts the boy, I can see him favor his right side and that leads me to believe that he's still injured.

Pennywise stops and then he lifts his nose, inhaling the air.

"Tasty, tasty, beautiful fear," he smiles again, but this time, his teeth are sharp. He leaps at the boy and they both vanish into the reservoir. I take a few steps back, hearing Pennywise laugh as the boy struggle in the water. Behind me, I turn to the boy that remains and it sounds like, very faintly, that he's trying to crawl away.

I take a step in his direction and then I look down when I feel something under my foot. The tall boy dropped his knife as he was tackled. I pick it up and then I run into the tunnel as the water falling into the reservoir turns red with blood behind me.

It doesn't take me long to find the boy with the broken legs and he pauses in his crawling when he sees me behind him with a knife in my hand. There are tears on his cheeks as he rolls over to wiggle away from me with his elbows.

"Please, don't hurt me!" his voice trembles and then I slightly relax my grip on the knife, staring at his expression. I'm supposed to be feeling remorse.

I'm supposed to.

But I don't.

I come closer to him and he keeps crawling back until something catches his wrist. He looks down, trying to tug his hand out of the water when he sees what's stopping him from moving. Pennywise pokes his head out of the puddle and then he wraps his arm around

the boy's neck before pulling him under.

I lower my eyes to the water between my bare-feet and I step in it to test its depth, but my foot is barely submerged. Whatever Pennywise is, he does have powers that no human can possess.

Emotionless and slightly numb, I walk back to the open space with the reservoir and then I wait. I stare at the empty dark tunnel, not really thinking about anything. I feel as though a lot of my internal switches have turned off, but one big switch has been turned on. A switch that I didn't think I was ever allowed to turn on.

Behind me, I can hear breathing and the warm shadow of something looming over me. I know he's there. I turn around, already looking up at the bloodstained face that's peering down at me with its glowing eyes.

Pennywise grabs me by the neck and pins me against the wall, lifting my feet off the ground. I grab his forearms to prevent my body weight from cutting off the circulation to my head.

"I found you...more than one child, Pennywise. I could have just given you one, but I've heard how many children have gone...missing throughout the span of this year, so I know you needed more. Maybe..." I move my foot back, trying to gain some leverage somewhere on the wall to take more weight off. *"Maybe you asked for one because you thought I wouldn't be able to do it. Maybe you thought that you were going to die. Maybe you didn't care if I formed a mob and led the people down here to kill you once and for all. I could have done that, but I didn't."*

He looks in my eyes and I don't know if he's reading me, but he let me talk before. He listened then and he seems to be listening now. Pennywise drops me on the ground and I touch my neck, almost used to being grabbed by now. I cough to clear my throat and he walks into the reservoir as I try to collect myself.

Pennywise comes out the other side, dragging the tall boy's corpse with him to the dark tunnel. He climbs inside, gnawing loudly on the body and snapping its bones.

I listen to the sounds and then I look down at myself to see what the damage is. No cuts and nothing hurts. The only thing that's ruined is my dress and my stockings, but both can be replaced. My life could not be.

I should leave.

I should leave while he's feasting and growing stronger. He was strong enough to kill these four children without feeding beforehand, so maybe he regained his strength by simply resting. Maybe that's why he sleeps for years.

One year of killing, twenty-seven years of rest. He couldn't sleep this time, so I'm guessing that he's going to have to be awake for another year.

But instead of leaving, I sit on the slope that I once walked down and I wait for him to stop feeding. Maybe he'll have something to say to me because there are a few things that I need to say to him.

About half an hour passes by, that's what it feels like, and the gnawing sound grows quieter until there's just the sound of rushing water again. I stand from the slope and I make my way to the dark tunnel, hoping that he didn't pull a vanishing act. But when I look inside, there's something that I didn't see before.

Light.

There's an opening on the other side and it's a section that I completely missed. Cautiously, I crawl through the tunnel, ripping my stockings in the process, and I come out the other side where my feet touch a pile of garbage. This whole area is filled with items, belongings that were once owned by children and probably a few adults. That's what it looks like.

In the center of the room, there's a tower of objects and I squint my eyes when I see the darkness of the night sky. There's no ceiling. I stare up at it in awe and then I clumsily find my way to the ground where there's no garbage beneath my feet.

"Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement's. You own me five

farthings, say the bells of St. Martin's," the nursery rhyme comes from a jack-in-the-box a few feet away from me and I can feel my heartbeat increase before I remind myself that fear is an option.

I take a few deep breaths before I walk away from it, slowly circling the tower of missing items.

I pause when I see a mobile stage without its wheels, and the side reads, in big words: PENNYWISE THE DANCING CLOWN. It looks about a decade old, faded, but it's probably much older than that. From my research, Pennywise has been around for a very long time.

I turn in a circle, looking around, expecting him to pop out of somewhere like he always does.

"Pennywise!" I call out and my voice echoes. *"I need to speak with you. I have something important to say, something that will benefit you."*

There's no sound to indicate where he is or what he's doing. But the door of the stage collapses and there's nothing but darkness inside... or so I think.

"There's only one way a human can benefit me, and that's if I eat them," he cruelly laughs, hiding where I can't see him.

I come closer to the dark stage, determined.

"That's not true," I almost lose my footing when I slip on something. I look down to see a yellow raincoat and then I kick it away from me. *"Today, I was hired to become a teacher at the local school here in Derry. Do you know what that means?"*

I don't wait for him to answer.

"It means I'll be around children. It means that I can continue bringing them to you," I talk at the darkness, somehow knowing that he's in there, even though his voice came from behind me. All around me.

In the middle of that darkness, I finally see his eyes. They narrow and they become more defined when he comes closer to me, but I can just see his eyes. Nothing else.

"You don't smell like fear, but that's because you don't fear me, do you?" he comes into the light and he comes close to my face, closer than before. *"You are strange, human. What I smell isn't normal."*

He tilts his head to the side, jingling his bells.

"Are you sick, human? Are you dying?" his smiles, almost hopeful that both questions are true.

"I'm not dying, but I believe that I'm sick," I respond, lowering my eyes before raising them to meet his again. *"You sleep for twenty-seven years, but when you wake up, you have no trouble understanding the ways that we've advanced as humans. That tells me that you're a far more powerful and intelligent being, something that's probably not from this world."*

Pennywise tilts his head again, trying to read my mind.

"Those that floated down, those that lived to tell their tale, they all said that they saw a clown or something that they feared the most. It means that you can shapeshift and the only way that you can know their fears is if you read their minds, which I'm sure you did," I look at the blood on his chin, which is drying now and it cracks on his skin. *"Earlier, I said I was sick. I feel like I am because I have an attraction to something that isn't even human, something that's evil and something that has been killing and eating children longer than I've been alive."*

I can't believe that I'm admitting this to a monster. What does he know about love or lust, or any other type of desire other than killing and scaring and eating? What does he know about comfort and kindness?

"I'm attracted to you, Pennywise. I know you're not human and you don't chose to feel love or desire, and you view me as a candle that needs to be blown out, a weed that needs to be poisoned, or one of the many pigs that needs to be slaughtered, but you've underestimated us as humans. You underestimated that group of children and their ability to overcome their own fears to destroy you, and you almost died because of it," my chest softly rises and falls. *"I don't know what you are and I don't care, but I can say for a **fact** that all the years that you've spent on our planet, you have never come across a human that has been willing to help you or a*

human that is attracted to you. You have never met someone like me."

Pennywise stares at me, and at this moment, I don't know what he's going to do next. I decide to keep talking.

"If there were others like you on our planet, surely you would have found them by now or sensed them. You have all these supernatural powers," my expression saddens. *"You're...You're alone, aren't you?"*

Finally, he speaks.

"I'm the last of a dying race," he says with an almost human tone. *"I left my dimension to wander the others, searching for a place where I could live, where I could find a successful mate. I found your planet, but I could not find a mate."*

He scowls and he shakes his head, surprised by his own words. But Pennywise drags his nose up my face to smell me and then he grabs me by the sleeves of my dress, staring deeply into my eyes.

*"I understand humans, but I do not understand **you**, human,"* his voice sounds almost like a laugh. A broken one. *"Or are you a human? You could be one of the hunters that killed others like me. Are you here to finish the job? I've gotten enough of my strength back and I've never needed anyone's help before, especially a human's help. I should just eat you now."*

His voice is escalating and I know what that's going to mean if I don't convince him. I touch the back of his hands, softly, and I move my fingers to his wrists and his forearms and then I place my hands on his white cheeks, cupping his face.

This creature has had children kick, scream, spit, punch, bite and stab him. I doubt that he's ever felt a gentle touch from a human before.

"I'm sorry you're the last of your kind," I look in his blue eyes and I can only imagine what this must feel like for him. A baby gazelle nuzzling up to a lion's chest. *"For the remaining days that you're awake, I want to help you. I know you don't need it, but I'll make things easier for you because...I just want to see what happens. And maybe because I've never felt fully human."*

Pennywise relaxes his grip on me and then he turns away to escape my gentle touch. He doesn't say anything, but he nods. Just once.

And that one nod is all I need.

4. An Understanding

I'm still standing at the base of Pennywise's tower while he vanishes into the darkness of the mobile stage, and I wait for a moment, wondering what he's going to do or more importantly, what he's thinking. I can imagine that he's reconsidering keeping me, allowing me to help him. What does the bait have to offer the fish other than what she is?

With my right hand casually resting at my side, I rub my fingers together and then I look down when I feel that they're sticky. The paint on his face had come off. I look at my left hand and then I look at the rest of me, noticing how dirty I look.

I look over my shoulder at the tunnel that leads back to the reservoir and then I make my way to it without saying a word. After I crawl through the tunnel, I search the grounds for the plastic bag that the tall boy had around his wrist when he was attacked. I remember seeing it.

I make a circle around the falling water until I find it and I check its contents to see that everything is still clean and dry. It's not comfortable clothes, but they're clean clothes. I glance behind me when I hear noise coming from the other room, the door of the stage reeling back up and then I reach behind me to unzip my dress.

My dirty clothes are discarded, lost among the other dirty and discarded clothes, and naked, I step into the falling water. It doesn't smell bad and it isn't discolored. It must be connected to the stream somehow. I cup the water in my hands, holding it up to my nose. It almost smells grassy with soft hints of metallic. I run my fingers through my hair to wet it and I rub down my skin as best I can, getting the smudges off.

Bowing my head, I look at my hands with droplets of water trapped in my eyelashes, and I can see the whiteness on my palms start to fade. I frown, saddened to see the color go. I continue washing myself until I'm clean enough. With the absence of soap and shampoo, there's only so much that I can do to get clean. At least for now.

I step out of the water and I drape my hair over my left shoulder, wringing it out. I turn to pick the plastic bag up when I realize that it's missing. My eyes move to the dark tunnel and there are glowing eyes looking back at me. I cross my forearm over my chest and I drop my hand between my thighs with no haste.

I don't ask for the bag.

Pennywise and I regard each other and then he comes out of the tunnel to look down at me. For a creature so tall, he must and for a human so small, I look up at him. He holds up the plastic bag with one finger and I lower my hand from my chest to take it.

He's eaten people, so I imagine that he's not unfamiliar with what a naked woman looks like.

"*Thank you,*" I say before taking a step back to get dressed. He watches me with his blue eyes, no readable expression on his face. Not even a smile.

My skirt is zipped up from behind and my blouse remains open to let the air circulate through the sleeves. I hate the feeling of clothes clinging to me after a shower.

"*So, this is what it's like when you're not laughing and someone isn't screaming,*" I notice how quiet it is and I notice how quiet he is. "*I'm not a mind-reader, Pennywise. You have to tell me what you're thinking.*"

Something shifts under his right sleeve and his chest moves, and in those two slight movements, it reminds me that this clown isn't what he really is. He's probably never shown his true form to anyone. I imagine that it might drive someone insane if they saw it.

But I'm sure if people knew what I was doing down here, what I've done and what I've said to Pennywise, I'm already insane.

I'm tempted to touch him again, just to know that regardless of what's standing in front of me, it has made the choice to spare my life. It made the choice to listen.

Pennywise needs to eat and sleep to survive, he knows how to talk our language, he knows how to attract people to him, which tells me

that he understands what we want. What we fear. And from some of the interviews, he can bleed and what can bleed can die.

There are leaders that engage in physiological warfare to break their enemies, how is that any different from what Pennywise does when he changes into what someone fears the most? He uses someone's fear against them and people do that to each other.

If he's a monster, then what are we?

I try to relax my mind as I think about all of this, letting him in, allowing him to read me.

And he gives nothing away.

"I don't have to tell you anything," he finally hisses.

I look at him, and now it's my turn to give nothing away. I turn to leave and I feel him wrap his fingers around my wrist. I pause, looking down at his hand and then I look at his eyes. They flicker from blue to orange, so I slowly turn to face him.

"That's right, you don't have to tell me anything. I'm just a human and you're this..." I shake my head, not even knowing what to call him. Monster? Demon? Creature? Pennywise isn't even his real name. It's just one of the many things that he calls himself. *"I don't even know what to call you."*

He pulls me a step closer to him and I curl my fingers to touch his hand, wondering if my subtle gentleness will put him off again. It doesn't, but maybe it's because he could sense what I was aiming for. Pennywise would make an excellent chess partner.

"If you were a human, what name would you have?" I simplify it, making it easier for him. *"But you don't have to tell me anything. I know it must sicken you to even consider picking a..."*

"Robert," he inclines his head, almost glaring at me. He releases my hand by pushing it away and my eyebrows furrow, wondering why he chose that name out of all the names in the world. I guess that name must have meant something to him. Maybe it was a person that he knew, another human.

"Robert, I'm Tsugi, but I'm sure you already knew that," still, I hold out my hand to him.

He snuffs out air from his lungs, dismissing the greeting, and I lower my hand back to my side. Boldly, I step closer to him and he doesn't step back. He wasn't shy about getting close to my face, so I won't be shy getting close to his face.

"School is going to begin soon and I haven't even bought a home yet, but I found a home that I'd like to buy and something tells me that it wouldn't cost me much," I gesture to the slope and the tunnel that I first crawled out of. *"The house on Neibolt Street, the one with the well in the basement. The house that's can lead me straight to you and the other way around if you so...desire to see me."*

I look in his eyes, wondering if that word struck anything. What he said earlier about finding no mate flashes through my mind and if I have any fears at it, it's the fact that I'm willing to give him so much...including myself.

"Anyway, I have an idea about how I can lure children to you. The ones that escaped, I'm sure many of them moved away to get out of this town, but some were probably too poor to leave, so they had no choice to stay here. I'll start spreading rumors, leaving balloons in bathroom stalls. Forcing them to remember what happened to them to keep the fear constant."

I move my hand to the bottom of my blouse and I lower my eyes, buttoning myself up now that I'm dry. I continue speaking as the pearl buttons are pushed through their silk holes.

"I can't lure more than one at a time and in no certain pattern. A new teacher has moved from New York to Derry and suddenly, the students in her class are disappearing? It would draw too much attention to me, and all it takes is one person following me and they'll find you. You've avoided being seen by too many people and you chose to stay underground for a reason. I will continue to respect that," I look up at Robert and my expression is serious. *"If I'm ever caught..."*

I don't know how to finish that sentence. He wouldn't be able to save me and I don't expect him to. The give-to-take ratio hasn't been

equal, or has it? He allowed me to live and he listened to me when he could have killed me. I guess we're square.

"I won't tell them anything. I promised you that I'd come back and I did, so now I'll promise you that if I'm ever obtained by the police, I'll just say that I was a copycat, that I wanted to be like the fictional Pennywise the Dancing Clown. I'll plead insanity, which might not earn me any jail-time, but they will have me committed. I don't know if that's what will happen, but it seems likely. But to plead insanity, I'd have to be evaluated by psychiatrists of their choosing and if I don't say the right thing, I will go to jail and I will die there," the seriousness of that situation is unsettling, but then I look at Robert and suddenly, the risk is worth it.

I feel like I'm protecting the last sabretooth tiger from extinction.

"You have fed me your own kind and you are building your home near my own. Do you want to die, human? Do you want to get caught?" he asks me, sounding almost playful.

His questions sink into my head and it doesn't take me long to answer him. When I was in the dressing room, that's where I decided. That's where I entered a housecat and emerged a panther.

"No, I don't want to die and I don't want to get caught. The truth is, you don't need my help, Robert. But there has always been something different about me and I believe that I have more in common with you than my own kind. I never desired to be normal, never desire to fit in. I'm young, but I feel centuries old," I ball my hand into a fist. *"I am the laugh in the dark too."*

I rapidly blink, feeling a surge of adrenaline flow through my system.

"Very well, human. You have..." I interrupt him.

"Stop...calling me 'human.' I have a name, Robert," I look from one blue eye to the other. *"Please, use it."*

He slightly raises his chin and his central incisors show more than usual for a moment.

"Tsugi. You have convinced me and if it's your desire...one of your desires," he gives the same look that I give him. *"If you wish to help me,*

then you may continue to do so."

There's silence again as we both breathe, and it hasn't escaped my notice that he turned a singular word into a plural. He hasn't responded to the things that I said relating to the word, but he understood.

He knows.

Before I consider leaving, a thought occurs to me.

"The house is condemned," he doesn't need to answer me because of course it is. I've been in the house and it doesn't look suitable for anyone to live in. I don't know how I thought that I could have purchased it. *"I'll claim a PO box at the post office and I'll have my mail sent there. As for the house, I'll keep the outside the way that it is, but secure everything on the inside to make it a livable place for me, even if it's just a room."*

Something flickers across Robert's eyes and I glance behind me, almost certain that I saw someone running from one tunnel to the other in the reflection of his eyes. But he's calm, so I must have imagined it.

"The house looks ancient to keep trespassers away, but it is under my control. What strength I had left, I used it to protect myself," he motions to the tunnel above the slope. *"It's safe for you now."*

Reluctantly, I head up the slope and then I look towards him to see that he's gone and so is the clothes that I left behind. That raises the corner of my mouth to a half-smirk and then I crawl through the tunnel to enter the house through the well.

Stepping out of the basement, I touch the wall facing the stairs and it feels strange to be back after how I felt the last time I was here. And it's completely dark outside, but through the boards over the windows, I can see the streetlight shine through the cracks. It weakly brightens parts of the house and it doesn't look as bad as it did before.

'It's safe for you now.'

Robert's words echo in my head and I brush my fingertips on the wall and I rub them together, expecting to find dust, but there's nothing. The wall, the one that was covered with mold and cobwebs, is now clean. And the dead vines hanging from the ceiling and the dead leaves on the floor are gone too.

I softly smile, keeping my hand on the wall to guide me around corners until I find the staircase that will take me upstairs. I rest my foot on the first step and then the second step, the wood doesn't creak from my weight. Certain now that his power is flowing through the house, I walk upstairs until I find an empty room that looks cleaner than the rest.

Is this his doing to?

"Okay," I say softly. *"This will be my bedroom."*

I walk over to the window to peer down, and I see nothing and the neighbor's house is dark. Their fence and trees will prevent them from looking in this window, but part of me is certain that they're already too afraid to look. Satisfied, I head out of the house through the front door and when my feet touch the street, I turn to look at the front porch.

Under the eaves, I can see Robert standing there and then a gust of wind blows my hair in front of my eyes. When I brush my hand over my face to clear my vision, he's gone. I look at the road ahead, already feeling so far away from him, but I know that I have things to take care of before I can see him again.

The town is asleep, but everyone will be awake in a few hours when the sun rises. The first thing I'll do is contact the owner of the apartment that I've been living in back in New York to tell him that I'll be moving to Derry. What I've left there, I didn't need. Everything I have and everything I need is right here with me.

When I reach my motel room after the long walk, I lock the door and I collapse on my bed, still thinking about everything that was said. There's so much to do and there's only a few more days until school starts. I close my eyes, body succumbing to sleep before my mind even has a chance to turn off.

When I finally awake, it's almost three in the afternoon, so I quickly reach for the phone to make the call to my old landlord to tell him that I won't be coming back to New York. After the phone conversation is over, I shed my old clothes and then I hop into the bathroom to take a proper shower before I drive to the store to buy supplies for my new bedroom.

It's almost six-o'clock when I return to Neibolt Street and I carry the supplies out from my car into the house after making sure that no one is watching me, but I have a feeling that someone is.

I just can't see him.

By the time I'm finished, the bedroom is looking decent enough that I'll be able to sleep here tonight. There's a tension rod hanging on the top of the entryway, sheer red curtains hanging from it. There's a small bedside table with a battery-operated lantern on it and hanging on the wall to the right is a painting of a gold dragon flying through an autumn sky. I also purchased a mattress, which was untied from the top of my car and moved upstairs to the bedroom. It lies on the floor for now until I can find the right bedframe for it. I bought silk sheets and two silk pillow cases for the pillows too. Looking around at my success, I see was still needs to be done.

Tired from today and the day before, I change into my nightgown and then I lie down on my side, staring at the painting on the wall. I swear that I can almost see the dragon dancing through the autumn leaves that are blowing in the sky.

Maybe it is dancing.

Out in the hallway, a floorboard creaks and by the time I lean up from the mattress, I can see those familiar glowing eyes staring at me through the sheer curtain.

"*You're here,*" I lean up from the bed and I hold the silk sheets against my chest out of habit.

Robert steps through the slit of the curtain and this is the first time that I can really see him. Underground, there's no light and he favored the darkness. Here, in the bedroom with the bright light of

the lantern, I can see more of his features but nothing more defined than his eyes and those red markings.

I call him Robert, but he still looks like Pennywise. I squint my eyes, wondering something to the point where I must to ask him.

"You call yourself 'Robert,' but you still look like Pennywise," I fold the sheets down on my lap and then I move to sit on my knees. *"What does Robert look like?"*

The lantern flickers off and then Robert moves into the shadows in the corner. When he emerges, he doesn't appear all at once, but his feet slide out first and then I can see his chest and then I see his face. I grip the sheets in my hand, enjoying what I see.

He's a man now. *Human.*

Slowly, I move off the bed and then I stand in front of Robert. He's dressed in black slacks, a black suit jacket and a white undershirt, black shoes and there's a red pocket-square tucked in his outer breast-pocket. I slowly raise my hand and I rest my fingertips on the soft red fabric.

It feels real and I can feel the heat coming off his body. His powers are unmatchable if this is what he's capable of doing.

"Are you hungry, Robert?" I keep my eyes down as I ask him this, still spellbound by his human form.

I can feel his eyes on me and I just hear one word.

"Yes," Robert whispers.

5. Appearing Human

I haven't been getting much sleep lately and the reason why is standing right in front of me, but I'm not complaining. Robert could have chosen to stay away from me, he could have chosen to keep the house in ruins, but he didn't. Just like he could have killed me when he was so desperately hungry.

Finally, I look up at him and his eyes are no longer blue. They're green. His hair is no longer orange, but dark brown. Maybe black. It's hard to tell when there's no light. And his face is no longer painted white and red, but it's the color of light beige.

"It's late, and there's a curfew for the children. You're going to have to settle for an adult," I can see him sigh, but I can't hear it. His chest just rises and falls.

I walk over to my luggage bag and then I start pulling out clothes, something low-cut and something alluring. It takes me around twenty-three minutes to get completely ready and during that time, Robert stands in the corner and watches me.

He acts like a feral cat that I had taken in before a big storm and even though he growls and hisses, he remains in the room with me. Always watching, always nearby.

Slipping on my high-heels, I turn to look at him.

"Do I look attractive enough to lure someone in for the kill, Robert?" there's a playfulness in my tone when I ask him the question. I know how he must still feel about humans and I don't expect him to be changing his mind anytime soon. But I hope he sees me as being different.

He must and that's probably what saved my life in the beginning. Robert lowers his head, avoiding my eyes. He must be struggling with his thoughts, what he should say. My heels click against the floor as I walk over to him and I touch his hand, boldly leaning against the side of his body.

"*Let's get you something to eat,*" I gently tug his hand and then I make my way to the stairs, letting him follow me however he wishes. He's only had four children that I'm aware of, but I asked if he was hungry and he said that he was.

That's all that matters.

My car is parked on the side of the house, out of view, so I get into the driver's seat. Robert is on the porch, veiled by the darkness, and I drive up to the entrance of the gate.

"*Are you going to come with me?*" I glance at the passenger's seat.

"*Drive. I will follow,*" once more, his eyes are the only thing that I can see.

Hearing him speak more than one word, it makes the hairs on the nape of my neck stand, and I grip the steering wheel to refocus on what I'm about to do. I turn the radio as I drive away on and "*Everybody Wants to Rule the World*" by Tears for Fears starts to play.

"*Welcome to your life. There's no turning back,*" he sings and those lyrics resonate with me because it's true. There really is no turning back.

I glance in the rearview mirror to see Robert standing in the middle of the road and when I pause at the stoplight, I look in the mirror again only to see that he's gone. He wasn't lying when he said that he was following me. The light turns green, so I continue to drive into town where the shops are. I remember seeing a bar there.

When I pull into the parking lot, I get out of my car and then I stare at the glowing OPEN sign in the window. I can smell cigarettes and I can smell the alcohol, and I can hear men laughing inside.

I take a deep breath before I square my shoulders and raise my chin and then I walk into the bar to find a victim for Robert to eat. I make immediate eye contact with the bartender, ignoring the men that are sitting at the tables and at the counter. I want to listen first, see what type of people I must work with before I lure anyone to their death. I want to help Robert, but innocent people don't need to die. Not anymore.

Just certain people.

I order a drink, something semi-strong to help me loosen my tongue and rid me of my remaining nerves. After I collect my order, I walk over to an empty table and then I slide into my chair. I sip from the glass, still not making eye contact with anyone. Making eye contact might elicit conversation and I don't need them to learn anything about me. I'm about to be teaching their children at the school and being at a bar, that already imprints an impression about me that I should really avoid. But this can't be helped.

Listening, I can hear a small table of men talk about sports and hunting, one talks about a leak in his garage. There are two older gentlemen sitting at the bar, watching a baseball game on the television. But sitting at a table near the bathrooms, there's a man with his forehead in his hand and he's throwing back his third glass of whiskey.

His shoulders shake and he's softly sobbing. I don't understand why until I see what's under his hand. He flips a small picture over, and it dawns on me that he must be one of the parents that have lost their child to Robert. Well, to *Pennywise*.

I move from my table to his table and then I sit across of him, leaning back against the chair with my glass in my hand.

The man places the picture face down and he wipes at his eyes, "*Hi, do I know you? Sorry, I'm a mess.*"

He snuffles and blinks the tears away before he looks at me. I shake my head, answering his question, and then I look concerned about his emotions. I do feel bad that he lost his child, but I would feel even worse if Robert starved to death.

There are so many humans in the world and frankly, the world doesn't need more. Not ones that will destroy it.

"*I thought I'd come over here to see if you were okay, maybe buy you a drink?*" my voice soft, feminine. I move my dark curtain of hair over my left shoulder and then I trace the collar of my dress with my fingertips.

His inhibitions are low and whenever anyone is sad, they'll look for ways to become happy again. It's normal.

"*Come on,*" I reach over to rub his arm and he slowly nods his head to the offer, slightly smiling. I walk over to the bar to order him another whiskey and as I wait for my order to be filled, I see Robert walk in. He doesn't look at me and he doesn't look at anyone else. God, my gaze is so desperate to follow him, but I can't. Instead, I lower my eyes and I can feel the muscles in my stomach tense in anticipation.

I've never seen him around humans before. It's like watching a fox curl up in a corner of the henhouse.

"*Here you go,*" the drink is placed down in front of me and I place money on the counter before I return to the grieving man. I sit down and over his shoulder, Robert is staring at me.

Does he think I'm incompetent? I've managed to lure children away, but I guess an adult is different. Suddenly, I'm glad that he's here.

"*Thank you,*" the man takes a drink of whiskey and he looks at me, the alcohol clouding his mind, his judgement. "*Never had a woman buy me a drink before. It's usually the other way around.*"

"*Well, it looks like you needed it,*" I smile at him and wink, and when he nods his head and takes another drink, I look over his shoulder at Robert again.

He's sitting in the corner with his back to the wall.

Waiting.

Watching.

I touch the man on his shoulder and I lean closer to him.

"*You could come into the woods with me. I can make you feel better,*" I whisper to him, wanting to lure him out to end his grieving. His suffering. He can be reunited with his child again and there will be no pain, no more worrying or goodbyes.

This is the reason that I've picked him.

The man nearly stumbles out of the bar with me and thankfully, everyone inside is distracted by the baseball game that's going on. No one notices that we've left together. I take his arm and I guide him to the patch of woods beside the bar, listening carefully if I can hear footsteps behind us. But when I look in the reflection of the shop windows, nobody is following me.

He's already waiting in the woods, I think.

When we vanish into the trees and we walk a few more feet in, he pulls his shirt out of his jeans. He puts his arms around my waist, kissing my neck and shoulder. I lean away, trying to keep him away from my mouth because he reeks of whiskey and I have no interest in him.

I look around for Robert, wondering if he'll remain in his human form or if he's going to switch to his Pennywise form, or maybe something completely different.

But the man is eager, getting a little too rough for my liking.

"*Wait,*" I put my hands on his chest and he doesn't stop kissing my neck and grabbing at my clothes. "*I said wait.*"

He continues and when I try to push him away, he forces me on the ground.

"*Stop!*" panic begins to rise and then I hear a soft voice behind me.

"*Daddy?*" the voice says and the man on top of me stops. He's staring at someone, so I tilt my head back to see a boy standing in the woods. The man rises to his feet and then I roll over to lie on my stomach, watching him wobble to the boy.

Oh, my God. It's one of the boys that I lured into the tunnels, the one that was afraid to go.

"*Son?*" the man whispers in shock and I lean up to sit on my knees, equally shocked.

"*I'm sorry I didn't come home, daddy. I got lost in the tunnels,*" the boy says as the man comes closer to him.

"Son, I've been worried sick. I thought...I thought something bad had happened to you," he reaches out for his son when I see the boy's eyes turn orange.

That is not his son.

Before the man can move away, the boy grabs his arm and smiles, showing sharp teeth almost too big for his mouth. He turns around, yanking the man on his back and he bites down on his mouth to prevent him from screaming.

I cover my mouth with my hand, watching Robert use his claws to dig into the man's stomach to disembowel him as he keeps him silent. He reaches up and then, in one strong pull, breaks the man's jaw away from his face. I press my hand harder against my mouth, watching Robert tear this man apart and gnaw on his flesh like a hungry animal.

I've never see him feed before and I haven't see anyone kill someone like that.

I lean against the tree, watching him feed on the dead man and then, after he's done, Robert rises to his feet and he starts walking deeper into the woods. I follow him, noticing that he still looks like the little boy.

But not for long. As he walks through the trees, he shifts back into his human form and then he kneels by a stream to wash the blood off his arms and mouth. I watch him and it's like watching a cat lick himself after devouring a field-mouse.

I feel nauseous from what I just saw, but at the same time, I feel empowered. God, what is wrong with me?

I thought that I've come to terms with what I am, what I'm capable of, but I guess I'm still not used to seeing it. And I knew that the man was grieving his child. I just didn't know it was one of the children that I had lured away.

Clean, Robert rises from his knees and then he turns around to look at me. His eyes dark, void of color.

Black like a starless sky.

I walk over to him and I can still smell the blood on his clothes. He doesn't say anything.

"Let's go home," I take his hand and I take one step back, letting him step forward for a change. And he does. I take smaller steps backwards and he follows until we reach the tree-line. Robert pauses and I turn around to look up at him. *"I'll drive back to the house, and I know you'll be following me."*

His eyes have regained some of their whiteness, and I can't imagine what made them turn black. I haven't seen him do that before, nor have I seen him kill a man so brutally.

Robert nods his head and then I release his hand to return to my car.

When I arrive back to the house, I walk upstairs and then I touch the wall as I remove my high-heels. I look at the reflection of my bedroom in the window and I stare at the dark corner, wondering if he's already watching me. I place my high-heels aside and then I unzip my dress before I step out of it.

The back is dirty, smudged with dirt. It's evidence of what could have happened to me if Robert didn't show up. It makes me feel sick.

I drop the dress on the floor and then I turn to look at the corner.

Robert is there, staring at me. He looks calm, sated from being fed and I walk over to him, looking him over.

"Did he hurt you? Was he enough?" I ask in a soft voice, sincere and worried.

He slowly nods his head and I comb my fingers through my hair, the two of us just breathing together in a dark bedroom.

"What form is the easiest for you to be? I know you probably don't enjoy being this one," I glance at his chest.

"My true form, but I show that to no one," he slightly hisses. *"Pennywise is the second easiest. It's what I've been for many decades."*

I want to do something, but I want him to be comfortable before I do it. I try not to think about it because I'd hate to be stopped, or even worse, rejected. But I should expect that because of what I am and what he is. You do not find deer cuddling with wolves.

"Then be Pennywise," I slightly smile, letting him know that I don't think of him differently if he were the clown or the human.

This time, instead of moving into the darkness to transform, he does it right in front of me. He grunts and growls, tilts his head as the whiteness comes to his face and his lips turn red. It's so bizarre to watch something emerge out of nowhere, solid objects that I can touch. It's startling and amazing.

In a matter of seconds, Robert is Pennywise again.

I come closer to him and then I reach up to touch the corner of his mouth with my fingertip, looking at him with admiration and not fear.

"To tell you the truth, I missed this smile," I whisper at him and he peers down at me with his blue eyes. I can feel his breath on my palm and I wonder how much self-control he's using right now to not make me bleed.

My hand moves down to the bottom layer of his ruffled collar and then I lower his lips on mine, not even caring anymore if he bites me or kills me because this is a kiss worth dying for. But to my surprise, he doesn't bite me or push me away or kill me. Instead, I can feel his gloved hand touch my lower back and my eyebrows furrow when I feel him gently cut my skin with his claws. It only excites me more, knowing that I'm kissing something that's not human. This time, I'm the one that's softly growling and I grip the front of his outfit, needing to hold something as he holds me.

I open my eyes and then he straightens up, breathing a little harder like I am.

"Stay," I touch the side of his face and there's no more turning away. I've proven to him that I can handle him in more than one form, that I can kill for him and that I'm trustworthy. And I've proven to him

that this is more than a physical attraction, but a mental one too.

He inclines his head and then I slowly turn to grab my nightgown from my bed. I slip it over me and then I lie down on the mattress, resting on my side, so that I can see Pennywise in his corner. He doesn't sleep because he has had twenty-seven years of it.

And then I'm reminded that he's only awake for a year. We've only known each other for a couple of days, but it feels like we've been together for centuries. I lower my eyes to the floor, dreading the day that he must close his and I'll have to keep mine open. In twenty-seven years, I'll be fifty-four and he'll still look the way that he did when we met. After that, I'll be eighty-one years old, if I manage to live that long. And then this story will be over. I'll never get to see him again.

I roll over to face the window, not wanting him to see my face, but I know that he's reading me. He knows what I'm thinking and I know he understands how I feel. Maybe. I'm sure it's still baffling that a human, something that he always viewed as prey, is attracted to him.

If there were only a way that I could live forever like him.

"Good night, sweet demon," I say with a trembling voice and then I close my eyes, forcing myself to sleep.

Asleep, my knees rub together, and I can feel myself tossing and turning. The dreams that I'm having aren't unpleasant, though. They're quite the opposite. I dream that I'm straddling Pennywise's lap and my hands are on his shoulders as I kiss him. I can feel the heat building between us, the way his hands move up my back and I can feel the sharpness of his teeth as he nips at my tongue, drawing a little blood from me. I taste crimson, kiss crimson.

The soft explosion in my stomach is almost painful and it causes me to sweat, but it's not enough to wake me. Still asleep, I pull the silk sheets over me and I rub the side of my face against the pillow, having dreams that I've never had before. I never imagined that I could feel this and not be awake for it. And then I have another vivid dream. I'm lying in bed, this bed, and Robert is between my thighs. I'm clinging to him as he moves and then it happens again, another

explosion that causes my muscles to spasm.

I gasp, leaning up from the bed and my hair is sticking to my sweaty forehead. There's hardly any light outside and when I look at the clock, it's barely five in the morning.

When I roll over to look at the corner, Pennywise isn't there...because he's standing at the foot of the mattress. I look up at him, still trying to catch my breath from the intense dreams.

"Fear isn't the only potent emotion that humans possess," he speaks to me and then he smiles. I look in his eyes and the dreams suddenly make sense. He can read minds, so there's no reason he can't influence dreams.

"You..." I trail off, a blush paints my cheeks and I'm more than tempted to grab him and pull him down on the mattress with me, but there's hesitation. There's still unanswered questions and I still don't know him as much as he knows me. I'm human and he's not, and I don't know if it's possible for us to be together.

My pupils are dilated and his eyes are orange.

"I..." I shake my head, trying to snap out of it. *"School starts tomorrow and I haven't been to my classroom, so I need to do that today. You can come if you wish, but something tells me that you're going to be busy doing something else."*

I hope that I don't feel like I'm dragging him to places where he doesn't want to be. Last night was the first time I've ever ask anything of him, other than to stop calling me a 'human,' which he has. And I'm very grateful.

"I cannot solely rely on you to eat. I, too, enjoy the sport, the hunt, the fear that human feels before I eat them," he turns to look out the window and he sniffs the air. *"It is morning and there will be children enjoying their last day of freedom. I will find no trouble finding one."*

Before he prowls off, he turns and looks at me sitting on the mattress. His eyes twinkle and I can hear noise in another part of the house, something that sounds like running water. I glance at the wall with

the painting and when I look back at him, he's gone.

When I finally gather enough strength to rise to my feet, I tremble like a newborn lamb before I must grip the curtain. I think about the dreams and it causes me to blush again. That beast. Quietly, I walk downstairs to the kitchen and I can see water coming out of the dusty faucet. I take a drink from it and it's real. I take another drink until I'm feeling more alert and then I wander upstairs to find the source of the other noise.

I find a bathroom and the showerhead is spraying water out into the tub. Thankful and amazed, I can feel my shoulders relax and then I return to the bedroom to collect some toiletries before I take a shower.

Once I'm in the shower, I wet my hair and then I smile.

"Help me make the most of freedom, and of pleasure. Nothing ever lasts forever. Everybody wants to rule the world," I softly sing, getting ready for the day after having such an intense night.

6. School is Back in Session

I've spent my entire afternoon preparing my classroom for tomorrow. I've wiped the blinds and the windows, pinned posters on the walls, made sure the desks have been cleaned out from the last students that were here the previous year. When the classroom is tidy enough, I sit at my desk with my notebook open in front of me, pen in hand as I write down my lesson plan.

Yes, I'm going to be feeding some of my students to Pennywise, but not all of them. I'm still going to be selective. When the bell rings and the students begin filling the school, there will be bullies and there will be troublemakers. Those are the children that I will be ridding the school of, ridding Derry of.

I'm sorry that the parents will mourn their children, but many of the children are this way because of their parents. It's partially because of their environment too. There are no opportunities to thrive in a small town, so why set expectations for yourself that you know you won't be able to reach? Most of what these children can hope for is opening their own shop, but most of them will end up working as cashiers, bartenders, mechanics, or they'll become mothers or fathers. Some will move out of this town, if they're smart.

I pause when I hear rain begin to patter against the windows and I think about Pennywise, wondering if he's feeding on someone right now. I wonder if he's thinking about me, about last night. I shift in my chair, getting aroused by what happened. I had no idea that he possessed the power to do something like that and come to think about it, that was our first intimate moment together, excluding the kiss. He didn't even have to touch me.

Maybe one night soon, he will. He's been alive for centuries, I'm assuming, so he should know a lot about humans. They seem to know enough about him.

I close my notebook, finishing my plan, and I head out into the hallway. I leave the school and then I slowly drive back to the house, taking a scenic route to clear my head before I return. Driving, I hope the principle finds the papers that I left him. I've completed the forms

because I claimed a PO box, which is wonderful since I don't want to tell him or anyone that I'm living at the house on Neibolt Street. They wouldn't believe me.

I park my car beside the house and then I look at the porch. No Pennywise in sight, and that worries me. Did he decide to distance himself from me because of how closer we're getting? Is the predator afraid that he's going to turn into the prey?

The rain starts to become heavier, so I walk into the house to dry off and then I head upstairs to the bedroom. I pause before pushing the thin curtains aside and I look at the dark corner only to see that it's empty. Could he have gotten injured? If he did, I wouldn't know how I could find him or what I could do to help him. God, could he be dead?

The very idea of Pennywise being dead makes my eyes fill with tears and I feel the muscles tense in my chest, constricting my heart. Quickly, I rush to the bathroom to see if the sink works. If it does, then he's alive. If he isn't, the water wouldn't flow. He's using his powers to make this place more livable for me.

When I reach the bathroom, I place my hand on the handle of the faucet and then I take a deep breath before I turn it. Water comes out, and I feel an immense wave of relief wash over me. I touch my chest and then I rest my back against the wall.

This is another cruel reminder that my happiness can end, that he could end. It probably would have happened if I hadn't found him when I did. And it just takes one person finding out about what I've been doing, one person following him into the tunnels, and then it would be over. I look at the open door, wishing I could call out for him, but I don't think he'll come. If he's okay, then that's all that should matter. I won't summon him because he's not mine to summon.

Less worried, I walk back to my bedroom and then I get undressed into something a little warmer. Raining, the temperature has dropped a few degrees and the wind is making the boards over the windows rattle. Strangely, I find the sound comforting.

Curled up on the mattress, I have my notebook on my lap and I'm drawing small pictures of things around the bedroom. The dragon in autumn, the thin curtains, the misty window. The empty, dark corner. I stare at it and then I turn the page to start fresh.

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to remember what Robert looked like. He has a strong forehead, defined cheeks, and sunken eyes. I open my eyes and then I begin to draw him in the top-corner of the page, but only his head. When I'm done, I start drawing Pennywise because he's easier to draw from memory because I've spent so many moments looking at him, memorizing him. His outfit more detailed than anything else.

Almost an hour later, I finish the drawing and I place the notebook on the floor beside the mattress. It's still a little early to be going to sleep, but I need to be at the school tomorrow to greet my new students and then I must start searching for a child or two to give Pennywise.

Choosing to sleep over dinner, I pull the sheets over me and then I close my eyes, hoping my dreams will be just as exciting as it was last night. And wherever Pennywise is and whatever he's doing, I hope he's happy and safe.

And I sleep.

The next morning, the alarm of my watch beeps, so I reach over to turn it off. Still half-asleep, I rest my hand down on my notebook and then I open one eye to see what's under my palm. I feel something wet.

I lean up, noticing that something has been added to my drawing of Pennywise.

His hair and his pompoms have been colored in somehow and when I look at the color a little more closely, it resembles blood. No, it is blood. I look at the dark corner and then I look around the room, wondering if he's going to show up. But there's silence.

Pennywise was here, though.

Smiling, I softly blow on the picture to dry the blood on the page and then I roll out of bed to take a shower. The tattered curtain is pulled forward to make sure the water doesn't get on the floor and then I tilt my head back, letting the water wet my hair. I close my eyes when it gets warm, still groggy from sleep. When I tilt my face forward, I can see a shadow standing in the doorway of the bathroom. Glowing eyes looking at me.

I grip my wash cloth in my hands, and through the small holes of the curtain, I can see little peeks of Pennywise. His knee, the side of his body, his jaw and his left eye. He doesn't speak and neither do I. Instead, I stare back at him and then I start washing my body.

The suds from the soap-bar find their way down my shoulders, over my chest and the water washes it away from between my thighs. I bite my lip, wondering what he's thinking as he watches me, as the mirror fogs. I'm not used to doing this for anyone. I haven't done this for anyone. I've only been in a relationship with two people, and one was with a boy that I knew since kindergarten and we first dated in high school, the other I knew in intermediate, and I was friends with both before we became a couple. But things didn't work out.

And honestly, my high school boyfriend wasn't experienced or mature enough to understand what to do or how to be seductive. Everything felt awkward and clumsy. One of my few regrets in life was that I wish that I had waited.

But here in the bathroom with Pennywise watching me, I feel like I'm with an adult and someone that understands what I'm feeling and thinking, and that's because he can read my mind.

And it hasn't escaped my memory, either, about what he said about being unable to find a successful mate on our planet and I can't imagine that he's come across anyone that was willing to accept him for what he was. Maybe he hid it, but maybe something happened and his potential mate found out. Maybe he had to kill them because of it. Or maybe he's selective about who he chose as a mate. After all, a hawk shouldn't mate with a pigeon, and I do remember what I said to him in the tunnels.

He has never met anyone like me, and I am no pigeon.

Growing aroused by the fact that he's watching me, I move my hand down between my thighs to touch myself and then I move my other hand up to cup my breast. I know he can see my movements through the old, hole-filled curtain.

Suddenly, I see him take a step closer and that causes me to pause. Hand shaking, I move the curtain aside and his eyes look predatory. My fingers grip the curtain and a shiver causes me to tremble.

"I hope I'll see you tonight. I..." I slightly duck my head, suddenly shy. *"I was worried when you weren't here, and I missed you."*

His expression slightly changes when he hears that I've missed him and he steps back again, still new to the gentle touches, the gentle words. New to this whole experience. He nods his head as he always does when his words fail him.

I smile at his nonverbal answer and then I slowly pull the curtain forward again to continue my shower, allowing him to watch me or leave to hunt if he desires. I know what my desire is and he's standing in this small room with me.

Pennywise leaves, of course, off to satisfy his normal appetite while I drive to the school after getting ready. Children will be taking the bus, walking to school. One of them will go missing before they even reach the grounds. Pausing at a stoplight, I can imagine him as a crocodile with his eyes poking out of the water as a herd of water-buffalo make their way across the river to the other side. I can imagine him snatching one of them and pulling the poor thing into the storm drain, underwater, to drown and devour.

HONK

I jolt in my seat when I realize that the light had turned green and then I wave apologetically at the car behind me before I press on the gas.

When I arrive at the school, I locate the faculty parking lot and then I park my car in the corner. I enter through the back door and then I head to the faculty room, hoping to meet a few of the other teachers before I must be in my class to greet my students.

There are four people present, two men and two women. All of them are older than me. One of the female teachers smiles at me and holds out her hand.

"You must be the new teacher that we heard about. My name is Ms. Graham. What is your name?" I take her hand with a warm smile.

"Good morning, Ms. Graham! Everyone. My name is Tsugi Hayashi, and you're right. I'm the new teacher and I just moved here from New York only a few days ago. It's wonderful to be here in Derry," I release her hand before flattening the hem of my dress.

"Welcome, Ms. Hayashi. My students call me Mr. Bright, but you can call me Gary."

"It's good to have you here. I'm Mrs. Hennessey."

The male teacher, the one that hasn't introduced himself yet, steps forward and he offers his hand with a smile. His cologne is strong, almost as if he sprayed himself with teargas. I take his hand and he gives it a firm shake before letting go.

"Lovely to meet you, Ms. Hayashi. My name is Joe Miller, and welcome to Derry. Where have you moved in, exactly? Many homes have been up for grabs because people have decided to move away. Ghost stories and all," he smiles. Something about him seems off. Not because of his questions, but it's just something else. I don't like the way he's looking at me.

I explain that I'm still looking at houses before I pick one, and I tell them that I'm staying at a motel that I booked in advance before moving. That raises a few eyebrows, but I smile at them as if to come off like I'm the type that doesn't plan anything in advance, that I'm the type that wouldn't harm a hair on anyone's head.

They'd be wrong.

We sip coffee and exchange a few laughs; the other teachers discuss who they don't want in their class and it sounds like there's more than two handfuls of students that are rotten to others. I try to remember their names and then the speaker on the wall crackles.

"Some students are beginning to arrive. If you're still in the faculty room, it's time to head to your classrooms to greet them," there's a blip and then all the teachers sigh, except Ms. Graham. She seems as happy as a baby bird getting the first worm from its mother, which I think is great motivation. For me, anyway. The others seem to drag their feet out the door and while the three teachers leave, Mr. Miller falls into step beside me.

"You've said you've only been here for a few days. It sounds like you could use a tour," he puts his hands behind his back, smiling forward. *"I wouldn't mind showing you around. Derry seems small, but there's a lot here to offer, despite the lack of people."*

I look off to the side, away from him, and I suddenly wish that I could feed him to Pennywise. But maybe I'm being too defensive. I softly hum to make up for the silent space, pretending that I'm enjoying the walk to the classroom.

"A tour? I'd love that, but I already know my way around town. I nabbed a map my first day here," I smile at him, briefly, and I pause at the door of my classroom. He stops too.

"Well, I hope you enjoy your time here and maybe if you're free one of these days, we can have a drink," he takes a few steps to the left until he reaches the classroom across the way, resting his hand on the door. *"I hope you enjoy your day, Tsugi."*

He steps into his classroom to wait for his first class to arrive and then I step into my classroom, slightly leaving the door open behind me. I close my eyes, annoyed, but I look around the room and it looks clean. I do love teaching children and I do like children. *Good children.*

My first batch of students begin to arrive, and I stand outside of the classroom with my back to the door. I greet each of them with a smile and a handshake, even a compliment to get them relaxed by my presence. I never want to be one of those teachers that arrives late and their students are already in the classroom, throwing paper airplanes, or one of those teachers that sits at their desk and doesn't even bother to look up as their students enter the room. I want to get to know each other them, mainly for two reasons. One, I want to find

the ones that will cause me and other trouble, and I want them to lower their walls and be able to talk to me about anything, including what might have happened to them on summer break.

The bell rings and the students are sitting at their desks, talking amongst each other. I stand in front of my chalkboard, thinking about Pennywise before I speak.

"Good morning, class! My name is Tsugi Hayashi, but you can just call me 'Ms. Tsugi' or 'Ms. Hayashi,' okay?" some of them stop talking and some nod their heads. Some look me over curiously, probably not used to seeing someone of my race at their school or in their town.

"I'm going to be passing out your syllabus, and I'm going to go over it, so make sure you keep it out and we can read it together. If you have any questions, I'll answer them before class is over," I walk to the seat near the door and then I hand little Danny a stack of paper. He takes one, passing it to the student behind him, and I return to my spot beside my desk with a copy of the syllabus in my hand.

"On the top, you'll find my full name, afterschool hours, PO box address, my email address and the direct number to this classroom," I begin.

And then I start reading what's on the syllabus, what I'll expect from them and what they'll receive from me in return. But halfway down the page, I can hear talking in the back of the classroom. One of my students, Marcus, is flicking the back of Nathan's ear and he's doing his best to ignore it.

"Excuse me," the perpetrator pauses before looking up at me.

"What?" Marcus acts like he's doing nothing wrong. *"Nathan and I are just joking around. Ain't that right?"*

He jostles Nathan's shoulder and by the look on his face, it's obvious that they're not friends. I motion to the empty seat two rows down.

"I'm going to have to ask you to sit there," I rest my hand on the counter, leveling my gaze with Marcus and he scoffs before he collects his things, moving to the empty seat. Yes, I see potential. Potential of him being someone I feed to my beloved Pennywise to.

Slowly, it seems, the hours pass by until I'm with my final class. They seem restless and frankly, I'm feeling it too. I decide to gather the students up and then we walk to the library together. They're probably familiar with the librarians, the old people that sit in here to read old magazines during the afternoons before they go home to their husbands or wives for dinner, or they head to the bar to drink and watch a game in peace. Home is always at the end.

The students are separated into two groups and they're guided around by two librarians. They show them how to use the basic programs on the computer, where to find the history books and the science fiction books, and where the bathrooms are. I'm standing near the checkout counter when I see movement at the table in front of me.

A man lowers his newspaper, and I stop breathing. Pennywise is in his human form, Robert, and he's staring right at me. He blinks before he leans back in his chair, propping his chin on his thumb and his index finger alongside his face. His elbow on the armrest and his other arm draped across his lap. I begin to feel that simmering in the pit of my stomach and I grip the middle of my dress as we lock eyes. The librarian hushing the students, the quiet flipping of pages, the mechanical sounds of the computers all seem to fade into silence when I stare back at him. I can feel myself building towards a climax when one of my students bump into me.

"*Oh, sorry, Ms. Hayashi,*" she apologizes and I shake my head, feeling frustrated. I tear my eyes away from Robert to look at her.

"*It's okay,*" I respond breathlessly. "*Excuse me.*"

Immediately, I make my way to the bathroom and then I lock the door to make sure no one else can come inside. I walk over to the darkest corner where the light is broken.

Waiting.

When Robert emerges out of thin air, I grab him by his lapels and then I kiss him with my eyes closed. He returns the kiss by lifting me off my feet. My legs wrap around his waist and I hold onto him as our foreheads touch. His green eyes turn blue and then orange, and I

can feel an explosion in my stomach. Stronger than the ones that I've felt in my dreams. I kiss him again, clinging to him as if I'd fall to my death if I didn't.

The lights flicker on and off and then there's a knock on the door. Drunk with lust, I slide my fingers through his hair and he slowly sets me down on my feet.

"Come home. We will have no disruptions there," he growls against my lips and then I touch his chest, gripping his clothes in my hands. The lights turn off and the door opens, and the librarian is standing in the doorway. Robert is gone, of course.

"Excuse me, miss, but we don't lock the bathrooms here," she points her pencil at me and I practically stagger to her and then she moves aside, bewildered. The students are already heading out and then I look at the clock to see that it's five minutes after school has ended.

I've survived the first day of school, and I'm wondering if I'll survive tonight. I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm nervous and excited. I leave the library and then I wander to my car where I sit quietly in the driver's seat. I stare at the dashboard, wondering if what just happened in there was real. Everything that has happened in the last two days have felt unreal.

I ease my dress up my legs and then I move my hand between my thighs, feeling wetness there. There's no imagining that. I close my eyes, tilting my head back against the seat as I try to regain enough composure to drive back home.

Robert isn't standing on the front porch when I arrive, nor is he waiting in the living room once the door closes behind me. I slowly ascend the stairs with anticipation and when I approach the bedroom, I can sense his abnormal presence waiting for me.

When I stand in the doorway, he's standing at the foot of the bed, and we stare at each other through the thin curtain. My fingers slowly part them and then I approach him to look up into his green eyes. Robert slightly inclines his head, piercing my mind with his gaze to read me. He sees desire, he sees anticipation, he sees a different type of fear that he's never seen before, and he sees something else that

causes him to blink and look away.

Those three words, I haven't said them yet. And how could I, he thinks. How can any human love a being that devours her kind, a being that has no real form or gender? A being that is pure light, pure energy. He's never explained it, but that's why he chooses to induce his victims with fear before the end. It's strong energy, and energy is what he eats. And it's why he prefers children because they're full of it. Full of hope, full of excitement, full of fear. Adults? Sure, he eats them on occasion, but only if he feels like appetizers. Life has disappointed them too much for them to be able to feel anything like they used to. They don't taste as good as the main course.

But this is the form he's choosing to be right now, and I'm responding to it.

I reach up to touch the side of his face and this time, he grabs my wrist to stop me. He pretends to bite at my hand and that makes me softly laugh before I lean against his chest. Big, beautiful, deadly monster.

"What you did in the library, how?" I step back to look up at him again.

"Undress and lie down. I'll explain it to you," he motions to the bed behind him and I blink faster as a result. He knows that I desire him. He can see it in my eyes, in my mind, and he can smell it. Fear isn't the only thing he can indicate because what I'm feeling for him is stronger than any energy that he's ever fed off before.

I reach back to unzip my dress, but my hand pauses behind me. I lower it back down to my side and then I drape my hair over my left shoulder, slowly turning around.

"Unzip me," I whisper over my shoulder.

Robert hesitates, but it's short-lived. He slides his hand on my hip and he grabs my dress, pulling me closer to him. I gasp, and I can feel the muscles in my stomach tense and my chest tightens. He lowers his teeth to the zipper and then he slowly crouches to unzip me.

My dress peels open at the top and I can feel his hot breath move up

my back as he rises to his full height. He touches my shoulders to ease the straps off me and then the dress pools at my feet. I step out of it, brushing it aside with a kick. I turn around to look at him and I slip my fingers under my bra-strap to slide it off my right shoulder and then I slide the other bra-strap off my left shoulder. The back is unfastened and then I drop it on the floor, not breaking eye contact with him.

I reach for his hands and then I place them on my hips. His palms rest on the thin fabric of my panties and then I use his hands, his fingers, to ease them down my thighs until it falls at my feet. His eyes flicker from green to blue to orange.

I slightly turn my head to the side, tempting him with the curve of my neck, and then I move to lie down on the mattress behind him.

My dark hair spreads out on the pillow under my head and I look up at him, resting my hand on my stomach.

"I am a creature that can shapeshift, read minds and control humans. I tapped into your mind to find what you desire the most, and I could only find myself there," he explains. *"I enhanced your desires and your fantasies to the point where you actually believed that I was touching you and your body responded naturally."*

I hope Robert is reading my mind right now because the world could be ending outside and I wouldn't care. Nothing can tear me away from this moment.

"Feel," is the only word he says before his eyes flicker.

My pupils expand and I can see vivid images of us together. The rest of the room turns fuzzy and I feel like I'm being pulled away from reality, slipping into a place that I've never been to before. But I can still feel the silk sheets beneath me and I can feel the softness of the mattress under my back.

I close my eyes, tilting my head back to enjoy the sensation and my fingers curl around the sheets as the feeling builds in my stomach, between my thighs. A few moments later, I'm trembling and turning my head to the side as the climax hits me. I open my eyes to look up

at him and then I reach for his hand.

"Robert, please," I sound breathless as he takes my hand before he lowers himself down on his knees. He touches my shoulder, pushing me down on my back again. My hands cup his face and they slide down to his chest. I strip his jacket off him and then I pull the hem of his undershirt out of his slacks as I kiss his neck.

He growls before he wraps his fingers around my wrists and then he pins my hands down on the bed.

"No, not yet," his breath is warm against my lips and he's so close that I can count all his eyelashes, see every speck of color in his eyes. I relax my arms and he releases me to rest his weight on his elbows. *"I do not believe you are fully aware of the danger you are courting, Tsugi. I have never engaged in such physical activities before, but even I know that would not be gentle. You may very well be my first...and my last."*

That causes me to hesitate, but at the same time, I know most of me would welcome the pain. And this, unfortunately, wouldn't be the first time that I've 'engaged in physical activities.' Then again, I've only been with one human.

But Robert has never been with a human before. I lower my eyes, thinking about what I'm feeling. I desire and I ache to the point where it's almost painful.

"I'm aware of how dangerous you are, Robert, but I trust you," I touch his upper arm, resting my head down on the pillow. *"If you're not ready to be with me, then I understand. Just stay on top of me and read my mind. Let me thrash underneath you as I climax and you can feed off my energy."*

I look back into his eyes and then he slides his fingers into my hair before he rests his forehead against mine as we lock eyes. My eyes flutter as I feel another climax build and then I shudder in pleasure when the small wave washes over me. In seconds, another wave builds and it's much larger than the previous one. It's strong enough that it causes me to wrap my arms and legs around him.

Outside, it's getting dark and I notice the lights fading from the room.

We can still see each other, though, and I'm grateful for that because I want to see him. I want him to see me.

"*Wait, wait,*" I murmur against his lips and my lips feel bruised from kissing him. I don't know how much time has gone by, but I feel like an open wound beneath Robert. And if he were to take me now, I know that I'd lose consciousness.

"*Let me touch myself, Akumu,*" I give Robert a nickname, something that highlights what he is. "*And turn into him. Into IT. I want to show you that you don't have to be in this form for me to desire you, even though I think I've made that clear. I just... Change, please.*"

He responds by doing just that. I feel his torso grow longer and I can see his light beige skin turn white. The red lines slowly appear on his face and his eyes change from green to orange. Gold. He grows a foot longer and within seconds, Robert is Pennywise again. He shakes himself and his bells jingle. It makes me smile to see him like this, larger and still threatening.

And God, I don't think he's spoken this much before. His voice isn't high like it was when we first met and his movements are less theatrical. He almost walks with a prow, instead of a skip. It's like watching an actor when he's not on stage, and it makes sense. Derry is his stage and the children he hunts is his audience. *Come closer, child. Smell the popcorn and the cotton candy, and see the blinking of the carnival rides. Come closer. Just a little closer.*

I lick his white chin and then I feel him slide his gloved hand underneath me to hold me closer to his chest. Slowly, I lower my hand and then I find the soft, pink pearl between my thighs. I rub it with my fingers in a slow circular motion, maintaining eye contact with the beast above me. I grab his ruffle collar with my free hand, lowering his lips down on me.

His tongue enters my mouth to touch mine and I softly moan, letting him know that I find pleasure in him. My fingers move faster now and when the climax hits me, my body convulses and I cling to him with one hand, whispering his name as the fire softens into embers.

The feeling slowly fades and then I touch my lips with my wet

fingertips. Pennywise grabs my wrist and then he licks the honey of my body off my fingers and I close my eyes, wishing I could stay in this moment forever.

Tired now, I roll onto my side and he lies with me. We stare at each other as we rest in the aftermath of pleasure, and I softly smile at him.

"Thank you for letting me in," I touch his chest and then I slowly close my eyes, nuzzling closer to his chest. *"I love you."*

Pennywise stares down at my sleeping form and his eyes dart from left to right, certain that he must have heard me wrong. But asleep, he reads my thoughts and he finds that it wasn't something said because I felt obligated to say it, but because it was the genuine truth.

He places his large hand on my back, resting his chin on the top of my head as he keeps my nightmares at bay as I rest. He's the only one that can because Pennywise is the biggest nightmare of them all. My beautiful nightmare.

7. Choices

Last night is still replaying in my mind, and I can't stop thinking about it, even though I'm going through the song and dance of playing 'favorite teacher.' The students are growing closer to me, telling me what they do when they come home from school, what their favorite movies are. What they want to be when they grow up... *When.*

I remember reading an interview of another child that saw Georgie Denbrough on the day he disappeared. Another boy was riding his bike in the rain when he stopped to look at little Georgie speaking to someone in the storm drain. He was certain that he was seeing things until he saw Georgie scream and turn away with his arm gone. Blood in the water, a reaching hand. The boy fled before he could see any more. He didn't want to see anymore.

The voices of the students fade into the background when I think about being in Pennywise's position. He had just woken up from his many years of sleep, starving, and he was talking the boy into becoming his first victim. His first meal of the year. My hollow gaze moves to Marcus, who's carving something crude in his desk with the tip of a pen. Rotten, rotten child.

The day finally ends when I accidentally bump into Mr. Miller while I'm leaving my classroom. My binder falls and he drops his cup of coffee.

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry," I pick up his coffee cup and there's only a sip left inside of it, the rest is splattered on the floor. He grabs my binder, holding it out to me.

"No, it's okay. Don't worry about it. I hope I didn't get any on you," I take the binder and I shake my head, looking at my dress.

He's been quiet lately and he hasn't bothered me since yesterday when we exchanged introductions and had a short walk in the hallway to our classrooms. I'm feeling more at ease around him.

"Let me buy you a cup of coffee to replace the one that I spilled. I know

that you probably got what was left in the pot in the faculty office, and that coffee isn't exactly the best. I know a little shop about a couple of blocks away," I nod to the door and then he nods, pulling his keys out of his pocket.

We get into our cars and then I make a right turn, heading straight after that. Once we're at the coffee shop, we stand near the window while he waits for his order. I'm eating a croissant.

"Thank you for replacing my coffee. You didn't have to," he rubs the back of his head and his other hand is in his pocket. *"So... How are your students doing?"*

I slightly shrug, wiping my mouth before I speak.

"There are many good students in my class, a few slow-learners that just need some patience and maybe two unruly students. Marcus and Brady," the tone of my voice changes when I mention the two boys and I sigh, brushing my hair away from my eyes. As soon as he receives his order, I can politely excuse myself and do some shopping in town before I return to the house.

"I have Brady in my class, but not Marcus. The principle made sure that they're not in any of the same classes together to reduce the chances of them ganging up on any of the other students," he looks at the number on the receipt and then he glances at the sign. Two more numbers and then his order should be up. *"Did you hear about that missing group of boys?"*

I'm looking out the window as he's speaking and when he mentions the disappearance of a group of boys, I turn to look at him.

"Oh, I don't think so. What happen?" Foolish me, I haven't been reading any newspapers. I should have listened to the radio or watched the news after that day, or something.

"Well, two mothers said they were at the park when they saw a group of boys, four of them, talking to a woman. That was apparently the last time that anyone saw any of them, and the two mothers couldn't really give a description of the woman because they were standing too far away to hear her or see anything. They had no idea what she said to them or if she had

anything to do with their disappearance," Mr. Miller shakes his head, baffled by another disappearance.

"I hope someone finds them soon," I say flatly.

Mr. Miller's number is called and he walks over to collect his drink. I head out the door to find that it's drizzling as I wait for him. When he comes out, he shakes his coat and takes a sip of the coffee.

"I must be going now, but I hope that I made up for spilling your drink," I take the last bite of my croissant and then I throw the napkin away. *"I'll see you tomorrow at school."*

He raises his cup and then we part ways. I sigh once I have my back turned towards him, and I stand under the eaves to search for my keys in my pocket. I could have sworn that I put them in there. As I search, I hear a voice around the corner and it sounds like a student from the school. Come to think of it, the young child sounds like Elliot. He's one of the good students and his future is looking very bright. Elliot is talking to someone, but I can't hear the other person's voice. Strange.

Still, I continue my search.

"Hey! That's mine," Elliot slightly raises his voice, talking to whoever it is that he's talking to. Finally, I find my keys and I step out from under the eaves to unlock my car.

"You want it back? Here. Take it," a feeling of dread comes over me when I hear that voice and then I run around the corner to see Rob kneeling by an open manhole.

Oh no. Oh **no!**

"Elliot, get away from there!" I run towards him, but Elliot is pulled into the open manhole by his hand. I do a baseball slide into the open circle and then I fall hard on my side, completely missing the ladder that's leading to the ground. When I raise my head to open my eyes, I can hear Elliot kicking and screaming as he's being dragged away.

It only takes me a moment to gather my strength, thanks to the adrenaline, and then I'm running after him. He's being dragged by the

back of his shirt, holding his arms out to me as I try to reach for him, but he's just out of reach.

We come to an open area, and when I turn the corner, Pennywise is lifting Elliot off his feet and opening his mouth to reveal his rows of teeth. I rush over, grabbing him by his sleeve.

"Don't, Pennywise! Robert, don't!" I pull at him and he drops Elliot on the floor before he slams his forearm into my stomach, which sends me flying across the room into a puddle. Elliot crawls towards me and shakes my shoulder, getting me to sit up, and I move him behind me as Pennywise approaches.

"No!" I shout at him and then he stops, staring down at me with drool dripping from his chin. Elliot is crying, peering over my shoulder to look up at the terrifying clown.

"You dare stop me, Tsugi? Why?" he snarls, eyes gold and ready to kill.

This can't be the same Pennywise that I knew last night. This isn't him.

This isn't me.

"Please... Please, don't kill him. Elliot is... He's a good student. A good person. He's guilty of nothing," I try to beg with him to spare this little boy's life. Elliot wraps his arms around me and crawls into my lap, hiding his face against my chest as he cries. Pennywise leans down, voice soft.

"Good? As if that matters. The only thing that matters is the fear," he bears his sharp teeth and Elliot jolts in my arms, burying his face even harder against me. Pennywise goes silent, looking in my eyes and he straightens up. *"The children you brought me were not randomly selected, were they?"*

He knows. He knows, and it didn't occur to me before that he doesn't care whether a child is good or bad. He kills and eats children because they're easy. Easy to convince, easy to scare, easy to kill.

*"There is no other option, Tsugi. The child has seen me and he has seen **you**. There is no possible way that we can release him and trust that he*

will keep his silence. I am going to have to kill him," Elliot cries harder, and I hold him.

"No, no. Elliot is a good boy. He won't tell anyone if we let him go. Right, honey?" I lean him away from my chest and I cup his small face in my hands. He looks at Pennywise and he's shaking, almost unable to take his wide eyes off the clown.

"N... No. I wo... I won't tell anyone. I p...promise," he stutters, barely able to find his voice. As he continues to stare at Pennywise, I stare at him.

Slowly, I lean him against my chest and then I gently rock him back and forth to sooth him. Elliot will grow up to graduate from high school with honors and then he'll spend a week applying for colleges in New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts. Maybe New York. A college in Vermont will accept him and he'll kiss his mom and dad goodbye as he moves away for his education. After he completes his courses, he's going to open his own restaurant and that's where he'll meet the love of his life and then they'll run the restaurant together, have three children, grow old together and watch sunsets on their front porch until his life is over.

But none of that is going to happen. None of that is going to happen because I can't let him leave. With tears in my eyes, I reach for the sharp piece of discarded metal that's shimmering in the darkness beside me and I hold it near the back of his head.

"I'm sorry, Elliot," my voice shakes as I stab the piece of metal into his small skull.

He goes limp in my arms after tensing from the fatal blow and then I slowly lie him down on the ground. I use my feet and the heel of my hands to crawl away from his still body and I cover my mouth, trying to muffle the sounds coming from within me.

I just killed a good student. A **good** child.

For him.

Pennywise continues to stare at me in silence and I weakly rise to my

feet, using the wall behind me for leverage. I toss the bloody piece of metal at him and it bounces off his chest as if it were a ball of tissue and then I walk to where I came from, but before I do, I speak with my back towards him.

"Enjoy the corpse," my voice is shaky and my shoulders are tense. *"Don't come to the house. Stay away from it and stay away from me. Just... Just don't."*

I walk off, leaving him to devour Elliot in solitude. When I return to the house, I slam the door shut behind me and the locks are turned. I know it doesn't matter because a locked door won't keep him out. Nothing can keep him out, but doing this is my way of coping with what happened. I slowly walk upstairs, shedding my wet dress in the process and then when I'm in the bedroom, I place the lamp in the dark corner to keep it bright. To keep him away.

I crawl on top of the bed and I hug the pillow against my stomach, feeling nauseous and dreadfully sad and confused. I love Pennywise. I love Robert. But just how much?

I cry for Elliot, for the bright future he'll never have because of me, and I cry for his parents who will go looking for him. I cry because I decided to do something right when everything was wrong. My sobbing softens until I fall asleep, hoping that I dream of nothing, hoping that I'll sleep forever to escape the complications of what happened and what I've become.

Hours and hours pass.

Light slowly fills the bedroom, and I roll away from the window before I open my eyes. I blink at the time, seeing that my alarm hasn't even gone off yet. God, I can't go to work. I wouldn't be able to see Elliot's chair empty and I won't be able to answer anyone that asks me where he is or even worse, have his parents come into the school to ask if I've seen him. I wouldn't be able to handle any of it, so I roll over to fetch my cell phone from my bag to call the school and tell them that I'm not going to be in today because I'm sick.

After I make the unpleasant phone call, I sit on the edge of the mattress and I look out the window at the trees. I feel like crying

again, but I just take deep breaths, which helps calm me down and then I do what I always do. I make a pros and cons list in my head, another thing I do when I must make sense of the madness and chaos of a situation.

Pros: I protected myself. I saved Elliot from having to endure a very unpleasant death. I protected Pennywise.

Cons: Elliot's parents just lost their child. Elliot is dead. Pennywise is angry with me.

And as expected, it's an equal amount on both sides. I rub the weariness from my eyes before I remove my bra and panties, tossing my underthings on the floor before I walk to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. I scrub my skin, getting the smeared makeup off and the dried tears and then I tap my skin dry with the towel. After that, I comb my hair and then I put my hair up into a bun before I take a quick shower to revitalize myself.

When I emerge from the bathroom with a towel around my body, I'm feeling slightly better. Well, as better as someone can feel after killing a child. I return to the bedroom and then I sit on the edge of the mattress, staring blankly at the floor.

I'm still out of it and I'm feeling hollow, and I know that something is going to fill that hollowness to compensate for what I lost, but what did I lose? I bite my fingernail, thinking about the inner-workings of my mind. Maybe I didn't lose anything. Maybe what's shocking me the most was that killing someone didn't disturb me as greatly as it should have. I felt nothing when I lured those boys into the sewers, so what was different than this time?

The boys that I lured away were 'evil' and Elliot was 'good,' but they were what I considered evil. Others might not agree with me because everyone has their own morals, their own definition of good and evil. Some might have applauded me and some might have sent me to the electric chair, but why am I suddenly so concerned about what others think about me? I never gave a damn what they thought before.

Elliot was a good student and a good person, but Pennywise was hungry and he eats humans to survive. It's the only way that he can

survive. If he had morals like most of the people that I know, if he had morals like a human, he would have starved to death a long, long time ago. He kills for a purpose, which makes me think about the reasons that people kill people. I remember reading an article about a woman that stabbed her boyfriend to death because he wanted to leave her for someone else. I remember watching the news and hearing about how a man was mugged and shot for his wallet.

Greedy and jealously drove those two people to kill someone, and Pennywise killed a child because he needed to eat him to stay alive. By those examples, his reason makes more sense than ours.

I'm beginning to calm myself down and the more I think about it, the more I realize that I shouldn't have interfered. An African tour guide doesn't get off his jeep to stop a lion from killing a gazelle, so why did I? I shouldn't have been selective and I should have distanced myself from other humans from the start. I was about to do something monstrous and I should just accept the fact that I'm just as much of a 'monster' as Pennywise is.

"*Damn it,*" I rest my hand on my forehead, closing my eyes for a moment.

I move off the edge of the mattress and then I shut the lamp off to darken the corner again. I don't even know how I'm going to begin to apologize for what happened and I don't even know if he'll ever see me again. The water still works, so he can't be that mad if he's still using his powers on this house, can he?

I drag one of the spare blankets off the mattress and then I fling it over the rusty rod that's above the window to shut out the light. I don't know if he can read my mind or if he can sense the realization that has come over me. I don't know if he still cares.

My stomach gurgles and I realize that the last thing that I ate was the croissant, and it wasn't a very good one. I head for the stairs and then I pause halfway down, staring at the wet spot on the floor where I had dropped my dress. It's gone. I slowly place my foot down on the step and then another, eyeing the drops of water that lead to somewhere else as I continue to make my way to the ground floor. Once I'm there, I turn the corner to see the drops leading to the

basement and I know that the well is there. He took my dress, maybe for sentimental reasons. Does he think I hate him? Does he think that I'll never want to see him again?

I walk to the basement and then I peek around the corner, staring into the darkness.

"If you're there, Pennywise...Robert...I'm not mad at you and I hope you're not mad at me. I realized something, and I understand now. I was wrong and you were right, and I will never come between you and who you choose to kill ever again," I rest my head against the frame of the doorway. *"If you want to see me tonight, I'll be waiting in the bedroom."*

I turn to head into the kitchen to grab an apple, a bottle of water and a few slices of cheese from the fridge. The electricity works, but I don't use any of the lights. It will only draw attention to this place and whatever power I use or leave on, it'll be coming from him and I don't want to burden him with that.

I head upstairs to the bedroom to eat and look at the list of the children that I have in my class. I think about what I can do to better help him. It's already become increasingly easier for me since I've removed the choice of being selective because I can't let my human morals interfere with a monster's desire to survive. It would be wrong.

Outside, the sky has remained dark all day, and I've called the motel and booked another week in the same room to keep the illusion that I'm living and sleeping there, instead of here. I'm going to have to spend a few nights there a week or at least be seen in the area to make it believable. And I'm not certain who might have saw me emerge from the woods in a rain and blood-soaked coat, but I removed it before I walked to my car.

I'm still expecting the school to call me, though, and ask me about Elliot and I know that I thought that I wasn't ready before, but I am now. I need to be because I'm sure someone might have thought it was strange that I called in sick when one of my students disappeared, but he wasn't just my student. He was in three other classrooms as well. I make a quick mental note that when I arrive at the school tomorrow, I need to keep my hand to my stomach and act

nauseous. Apply less makeup to look sickly.

It's close to five in the afternoon now, and I still haven't heard anything from Pennywise. I wonder if he even heard what I said to him. Deciding to check, I head downstairs and then I pause at the top of the last flight. Pennywise is in his human form and he raises my dress with one hand, blood on the corner of his mouth.

"I had it cleaned for you before I ate the laundress," his voice soft and low, playful even.

I run down the remaining steps and then I wrap my arms around him, crushing the plastic wrapped dress between us.

"I'm so sorry, Robert. I shouldn't have tried to stop you and I shouldn't have..." he cradles the back of my head with his hand, hushing me. I take a deep breath, soothed by his presence and I keep my eyes shut, enjoying the warmth of his body. He removes the dress from between us and he hooks the hanger on the railing of the staircase before touching the side of my face to look down at me.

"Come with me," he kisses my forehead and then he takes my hand, leading me upstairs to the bedroom.

(Find 5AM by Amber Run, and play it while you read this next part.)

We stand at the foot of the mattress, and I can feel the smudge of blood he left on my skin when he kissed me as the breeze softly blows in through the open window. Robert leans closer, almost threateningly, and my skin covers itself with goosebumps. He softly inhales to smell me and I gently grasp the front of his shirt to lean him closer to my face. He gazes into my eyes, reading my mind, and then he slowly nods his head.

I take his face in my hands, kissing him and then I reach back to lie down on the silk sheets. He removes his shirt before he gets down on his knees between my legs and I move my hand down his bare chest before I unbutton his pants. Once we're naked together, Robert places his hand beside my head and I reach for his other hand to place it on my chest. During this, I wonder what he's thinking, if he's struggling to resist the urge to eat me, if what he's seeing is arousing to him.

He's the mind-reader, not me.

We were always toys to him, puppets for his use and nothing more. Until now. I know, physically and mentally, I'm not an equal to him and I never will be. How can anyone compete with what he is?

Robert moves his hand down my chest, between my breasts, and he pauses at my stomach before he moves his hand even lower. How does a creature like him know how to touch a woman? Then again, he's been alive for centuries, probably more than that. Maybe even a millennium. And intimacy is something that some people fear, men is something others fear too. He's probably come across a few victims with those certain fears in their mind, a footnote in their novella of nightmares, and he absorbed the reasons why.

His fingertips brush against my opening and I bite my lip, never realizing until now how much I desired his intimate touch. He leans down to kiss my neck and then I turn my head to the side, showing him that I trust that he won't sink his teeth into my skin and kill me. My eyes are closed until I feel something wet drip on my chest and when I look up at Robert, his chin is wet with saliva. I reach up, gathering the warm wetness on my fingertips and then I reach down between my thighs to rub it into myself. That makes his eyes go from green to gold, and he strikes my mouth with his lips to kiss me.

Robert's hand is rough now as he stimulates the pearl of nerves that's hidden among the soft folds of pink flesh and I open myself wider to him to allow him to explore one of the most intimate parts of me.

It's a slow burn, the buildup to the first climax, and when it happens, I grip his forearm and shoulder and my hips rub against his fingers to let the explosion happen. My lips part as I moan and I slide my hand down from his shoulder to his chest and then I turn my head to look up at him. His eyes are now the color of fire, red with hints of yellow.

My dark brown, human eyes move down to the spot between his strong thighs to see what should be there. My fingertips stroke the underside of his member and his skin is smooth and warm against my palm as I grasp him.

"Are you prepared for this, Tsugi? I will be gentle for as long as I can," he

whispers in my ear and a shiver runs through me.

I position him against me and then I wrap my arms around his shoulders, clinging to him before he even starts.

"Take me, Robert, yes. I'm yours," he leans down to ease his tongue into my mouth and then I feel his hips brush against my inner thighs as he eases his hard length into my body. I moan against his lips as my muscles embrace him and then he begins to move in a rhythmic pattern, the springs in the mattress creak beneath us.

It doesn't take long for the second climax to hit me and before it does, I touch the side of his face and I look in his eyes as I'm blinded by the sensation. It's so strong that I pull at the sheets, trying to escape from underneath him, but he places his hand on my neck to keep me in place. I touch the back of his hand as the feeling simmers down and I find his thumb, brushing my tongue against it. I open my eyes to look up at him again and they flutter as another climax threatens to slam into me. I move his hand from my neck to my mouth to cover my cries of pleasure and then I writhed underneath him.

I feel like an open wound, raw and exposed, and there's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be than right here with him.

My breath is warm against his palm as I murmur something to him and then Robert slips his hand away from my mouth to hear me.

"...into him," I murmur the two words and then his thrusting slightly slows to let me gather enough control to speak. *"Turn into him, turn into Pennywise. I want to be with him too."*

Robert reads my mind, making certain that I'm thinking clearly and that it's not something I'm desiring because of what he's making me feel. He begins to ease away, but I reach down to press my hand against his hip.

"No, no," I lick my lips, which are red from kissing and then I weakly lift my head off the pillow to whisper in his ear. *"Change while you're still inside me."*

I rest my head down and his gaze hardens, stunned by my words, and he begins to transform.

White and red begin to cover his face, his teeth shift in his mouth as more of them emerge from his gums and he slowly grows a foot taller as his hair goes from dark brown to orange-red. When I raise my hands from his shoulders, the powdery whiteness crawls down his body all the way to where my gaze can't follow and I can feel his hand double in size against my left breast. And it's not the only thing that doubles in size.

I bite my bottom lip and my eyebrows crease in pain when he stretches me. He's seven-foot, three-inches tall in this form, and he's achingly proportionate. I can barely handle him, but I need this. I need him.

He softly growls, leaning his head to look down at me the same way a predator looms over a prey that's wounded, and I'm at his mercy. He's not gentle in this form, not smaller. I never expected him to be because this is the form he chooses when he's on the hunt and he needs to be rough and terrifying and large. I reach up to touch the red line on his face, still noticing how it doesn't smudge. It doesn't smear under my fingertip because this isn't face-paint, but markings. The tiger has stripes and the cheetah has spots. This is what Pennywise has.

"*You're perfect,*" my fingers brush against his red lips and then I push the silk sheet away from my right shoulder. I turn my head, exposing the skin there. "*Bite me. Mark me. Please.*"

His lips peel back to show the front rows of his sharp teeth and then he slowly sinks the points into my shoulder as his hips move closer to mine. The muscles in my body tense in pain, but the sting of his bite and the ache of his length somehow fuse together to create pleasure. I cradle the back of his head as the smell of blood and arousal surrounds us.

I wince as he relaxes his grip from my shoulder and he licks his lips, cleaning the blood off them. I can no longer use the muscles in my right arm without wincing, but the pleasure I'm feeling numbs the pain. Pennywise lowers his head to lick the wound as he continues to

penetrate me and my hands move down his chest as he leans up to stare down at me.

Blood drips on my breasts and stomach and his claws dig into my hips as he moves me against him in the way that he wishes to feel me. I collect a drop of my blood on my finger and then I look up at him, tasting the crimson evidence of his ownership over me. In response, he digs his claws deeper into my hips before covering me with his chest again. I kiss him, keeping my thighs open to let him take from me and then my fingernails dig into the back of his shoulders when another climax builds. This one might make me pass-out.

Sensing this, he touches our foreheads together and then I cry out as he buries his painted face against the curve of my bleeding shoulder.

With my head tilted back, I don't see it, but my stomach glows with light and I can feel a strange warmth fill me. I continue to cling and kiss him as the feeling slowly simmers into soft tingling and then he touches my arm, slowly easing out of me. He lifts me effortlessly into his arms and then he collapses on his side, holding me. We lie in the sweaty aftermath of our lovemaking and after half an hour, my body is calm again and I'm stroking the side of his face.

I marvel at his colors, looking at him with nothing but adoration and trust, and then I rest my hand on his bicep before I nuzzle my cheek into the pillow.

"I love you, Pennywise. I love you, Robert," his eyes flicker from gold to green when he hears those words leave my lips and he lowers his eyes, uncertain of how to respond. No human has said this to him before.

"We love you too," his response soft and almost shy, and I wearily smile before closing my eyes.

8. Suspicion

When I wake up the next morning, I don't expect to find Pennywise still beside me, but when I open my eyes and turn my head, his golden eyes are staring down at me. I reach up to touch the side of his face, the memory of last night comes flooding back.

"Good morning, Akumu," my voice a little hoarse from crying out earlier. Good morning, Nightmare.

Pennywise inclines his head in response and when I move to sit up, I touch my shoulder before looking all around me. The sheets have been replaced and I'm not covered in dry blood.

"I carried you to the washroom to bathe you last night. You were covered in blood and it would have been...rude of me to allow you to wake up in such a state," Pennywise explains, and my heart melts a little. I'm almost upset that I wasn't alert enough to open my eyes at least once during that process so that I could've remembered it.

I tuck my legs underneath me before wrapping my arms around his right arm. My cheek against his shoulder as I study his profile. My body aches from last night and being able to see him now, I wonder how it was possible for me to even handle him. He's just an inch shy of being two-feet taller than me in this form. My muscles tense and relax, though, remembering how he felt.

And I remember the event that came before.

Slowly, I lift my right leg to straddle his right thigh and I rest my hands on his porcelain-like shoulders. We didn't really discuss what happened in the sewers and even though we made up, this conversation is important to have.

"I want to explain what happened," my eyebrows crease as my hands move to his chest. *"I had no desire to kill children before I met you, so I don't want you to think that I was using you as a way of disposing them without actually having to do the dirty work. I did it because I found you beautiful and monstrous, and I didn't want to see something like you die. And me being selective was just my 'human way' of handling something*

that I wasn't mentally able to handle yet. But I do now, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have approached this using human logic and reasoning because what I'm doing isn't something humans would do."

Pennywise lowers his golden eyes for a moment before he places his plate-size hands on my hips. I slightly tense, never knowing what he's going to do next, but I trust him more than I trust any human being at this point. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, daring myself to lean closer to him. My warm breasts press against his bare chest.

"I understand, Tsugi. You had no intention of using me and I would never call you a liar because you have been nothing but honest with me the day that we met," his sharp claws softly graze my skin as he moves his hands up and down my back. *"I must admit that even animals are selective. A small collective of lionesses will watch gazelle before picking one to devour. The smallest, the slowest, the wounded. They will separate the animal from the others, devise a strategy of how to surround it before taking it down. They have their claws and teeth and brute strength like I have mine, but I am not animal, nor am I human."*

"I am something much more," he finishes.

My skin prickles when I hear his response and then I rest my forehead on his shoulder, sighing against his pale skin. I want him again, but I'm sore from last night and I must get ready for work soon, even though it's five in the morning.

Sensing my desire, Pennywise response by lowering me on my back and then he slowly wraps his long fingers around my wrists as he lies on his stomach between my thighs. God, how easy it is to forget that he's able to read minds.

I feel his tongue brush against my sensitive opening and I close my eyes as he softly laps at me, almost teasingly. My wrists strain in his grip as I attempt to stop myself from shaking, muscles still weak from what happened many hours ago. My hips begin to move in response, though, body still hungry for his touch regardless of how weary it is. Pennywise softly sinks his teeth into my inner thigh, but not hard enough to break the skin and knowing how gentle he's being after seeing the power he possesses reminds me why I trust him.

"Tasty, tasty arousal," he murmurs before easing his long tongue into my body. There's a brief sting, but it's quickly replaced with pleasure. I tilt my head back as I turn my hands over so that our palms are facing each other. He softly growls, which makes my thoughts go wild.

I'm the first and only human that he's even eaten this way before.

The naughtiness of that thought and the thrusting of his tongue brings me to climax. I let out a series of moans as I strain against his grip, thighs shaking and body pulsing. Weak from the explosion, he releases my wrists and he moves his tongue up the middle of my body before kissing me. I take his face in my hands as I kiss him back, tasting myself on his tongue and lips. It prolongs the burning in my stomach and I slowly stretch his lower lip with my teeth before resting my head down again.

"When I was a little girl, I'd always check for monsters under my bed. Now he's in my bed," I softly laugh, pressing a kiss to his red nose. *"I have to get ready for work and I'm sure you're starving. I'd offer to bring you breakfast in bed, but you don't strike me as the type that eats scrambles eggs."*

I wink at him and he, for the first time since I've met him, cracks a small smile. He licks my wounded shoulder before allowing me to slip out from under him and off the bed. I rest my hand on the curtain before I look back at him, glorious and naked.

"Beast," I bite my lip before vanishing into the bathroom to get ready.

When I arrive at school, there's a police car parked in the main parking lot and I know why they're here. Elliot went missing yesterday and they're probably here to question the principal, the teachers and a few of his classmates. I'm aware that calling in sick the day after his disappearance wasn't the smartest thing to do, but at the time, I knew that I wouldn't be able to handle any questioning.

Before I get out of my car, I check my makeup to make sure that it makes me appear sickly. No blush, no eyeshadow, no lipstick. Ready as I'll ever be, I walk through the back door with my hand on my stomach. Some students pass me and whisper, probably noting how

ill I appear and I stop to talk with a few of them.

"Ms. Hayashi, did you hear about Elliot?" one of the young boys ask me, and my eyebrows and forehead crease.

"No, what happened? Is he sick? I think there's a bug going around because I wasn't feeling well yesterday and I'm still not feeling a hundred-percent today, either," I softly pat my stomach, drawing their curious eyes to the area.

They explain that Elliot's parents called the police yesterday because he didn't come home from school and that no one really remembers seeing him. They tell me that a lot of children have been going missing, a total of five, including the four boys that went missing a few days ago. They also tell me when the police arrived and who they've been questioning. Children are always so eager to repeat what they've overheard.

I cut them off and I immediately head to the principal's office to delay the inevitable. I know I'm going to be questioned eventually and if I head straight to his office, he'll see my concern and if the police are with him, then they'll see it too.

"Ms. Hayashi, we're glad to see you back. Did you..." the principal tilts his head. "Did you forget to put your lipstick on?"

"Oh! Yes, I must have. I was in such a rush to get here because I took a cold medicine last night that knocked me out, and I was afraid that I was going to be late. I wouldn't have taken so much if I knew it was going to keep me under for so long," I explain, still keeping my hand on my stomach. He nods his head in understanding and then he tells me that two police officers are here and the reason why.

I slowly sink into his chair, staring at the front of his desk.

"Elliot is missing?" my voice soft and sad, and I look up at him with trembling eyes. "Do you think he could just be hiding at a friend's house? Playing hooky? Are his parents...kind to him?"

Keep playing the part, Tsugi. Keep playing innocent and tap into what you felt before you understood how things had to be.

Remember who you're protecting.

The principal removes his glasses and he pinches the bridge of his nose, not appearing to suspect me at all. He would have his reasons if he thought about it. I'm new in town and I was absent the day a student was reported missing, but children have been going missing since before I moved here and I've made it obvious that I care about my students.

The door opens, and two police officers step into his office.

"We're sorry to interrupt," they remove their hats before one of the motions to me. *"Is this the teacher that was absent the day of Elliot's disappearance?"*

I rise from my chair, offering my hand to one officer and then the other. My lips show no smile and my eyes show no light.

"Good morning, officers. I'm Ms. Hayashi, and yes, I was absent yesterday. I was feeling sick and I'm still not feeling well, but I didn't want to miss another day of work," I glance at the principal, trying to remember how scared Elliot was and how I was feeling at the time. My eyes fill with tears. *"He just informed me that Elliot went missing yesterday and he's not the first child to go missing this month. I glanced at the bulletin in the faculty office the day before and I saw that four other children had gone missing as well. I just don't understand how this could happen here."*

The officers glance at each other.

"Care to elaborate, miss?" he takes out a pen, scribbling something down. Presumably my name and what I look like, what I'm saying and what I know.

"I'm from New York and children go missing there all the time. There are many unfit places to live there, especially areas where gang violence is high, and I just didn't think that children would go missing in a small place like Derry. It's one of the reasons I moved here," my voice is steady, but I relax it a little to make it sound shaky. I am shaking.

"Can anyone verify where you were afterschool the day Elliot

disappeared?" the other officer speaks and his expression looks somewhat...vacant. He's an older gentleman, which means he's been here for a while, and I'm sure he's used to these disappearances.

"Well, I suppose. I stepped out of my classroom and I accidentally bumped into Mr. Miller. I spilled his coffee, so I asked if I could buy him a new one. We drove to the coffee shop next to the post office and we spoke for a little while before we parted ways," they nod their heads.

They ask for my number and where I'm living, and I explain why I've been staying at a motel. Suddenly, I find it a relief that I've chosen to stay at a motel, instead of a reputable hotel. There are cameras outside of hotels and they use computers to keep records. The motel that I'm staying in, there was a computer in the lobby, but the screen was black and the man didn't really seem to care if I had the credit card to prove that I had purchased the room. Little to no security and even less care.

"I really hope you find Elliot, officers. This is..." I wipe the underside of my eye. *"This is horrible. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose a child. My love goes to his parents."*

They tip their hats at me and then they exit into the hallway, probably to speak with Mr. Miller to make sure that my story is verified. I rub the principal's shoulder before leaving his office to head to my classroom.

The bell rings and the students are sitting at their desks, quiet and sullen, but not all of them. Marcus, which comes to no surprise, seems unfazed by the news that one of his fellow classmates have gone missing. I'm sure he's heard.

"Students, I'm sure all of you are aware of what happened and I'm sorry to say that it's true. If any of you know the whereabouts of Elliot or if any of you remember seeing him, then I'd like you to tell me and I'll pass that information along to the officers," they nod their small heads and then there's a knock on the door. *"Come in."*

The principal stands in the doorway and he smile at the students before he comes over to my desk.

"A visitor came by, someone that often visits Derry, and he's been known to make monetary contributions to certain establishments and we're hoping to get on his good side. There are many things that we'd like to get fixed here at our school and we just don't have the funding to do any of that right now, but if you can show him how good you are at teaching the students, he might consider making a large donation that would nearly solve all of our problems and maybe a little more," I'm stunned, but this is good for the school. There are a lot of things that could use some improvement.

I nod my head in understanding before I turn to address the class.

"Students, I want all of you to be on your very best behavior because we have a special guest. He'll be watching me teach for a little while," I turn towards the door to see who the visitor is and my eyes slightly widen.

Robert takes a step into the classroom, and he's dressed in a suit with his hair combed back and he looks at me over the principal's shoulder. Oh, my God, what is he doing here?

"Good luck, Ms. Hayashi," the principal touches my shoulder before he leaves the classroom.

I slightly shake my head before I approach Robert and I offer him my hand, which he takes immediately.

"It's nice to meet you, sir. I'm Tsugi Hayashi, and welcome to my classroom," I practically whisper the words to him and I slightly lower my head, holding onto his hand a little longer than I should.

"You can call me, Robert, Ms. Tsugi. And believe me, the pleasure is all mine," he half-smiles before he releases my hand and then I look for a place where he can sit. The only empty seat is the one that Elliot would be in if he were alive.

"You can sit there, Robert," he moves to slide into the vacant seat and I lower my eyes, avoiding his. I can't look at him because he's all that I'll ever want to look at for the rest of the day and his presence is already a distraction. *"Well, class, let's begin."*

They're given a small lecture about art and history and how they

reflect each other, and Robert is sitting still in the chair as he listens to me. In the back of the class, Marcus is whispering something to Joel, who's sitting in front of him, and I stop talking to turn my attention to him.

"Marcus, is there something that you'd like to share with the rest of the class?" I raise my eyebrow at him and he scoffs, waving me off. Robert slowly turns in his chair to look at the boy and Marcus looks over at him, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. He shifts in his chair before lowering his head to the handout in front of him. Robert turns to look at me again and I clear my throat, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. *"Well then, Marcus, please remain quiet before you miss something vital."*

I continue explaining the handout, and it's about a history paper that they'll be writing soon and then Robert raises his hand. I pause, looking at him. *"Yes, Robert?"*

"I'd like to use your washroom, but I don't know where it is," he lowers his hand, rising from his chair. *"I was hoping that you can show me."*

I blink at him and then I place the paper on my desk, putting a weight on it.

"I'll be right back, class. Talk amongst yourselves," I walk out of the classroom, and Robert and I walk to the faculty room where there's a personal bathroom for the teachers. Once the door closes behind us and we're sure that we're alone, I put my arms around him and I tilt my face up for a kiss. He takes my face in his hands and he deeply kisses me. I feel the wall against my back and his hands move down my neck to my breasts.

"What are you doing here?" I murmur, half-opening my eyes to look at him before he nips the curve of my neck. I cradle the back of his head with my hand, keeping his lips on me for a moment longer. *"You should have told me that you were coming. I wouldn't have looked so shocked."*

He lifts me off my feet and then he turns to place me on the edge of the table. My back slams against the surface when he pins my wrists down and then he leans over me, smelling my arousal and desire. He

smells my worry too.

"The principal is going to make an announcement and there's going to be an assembly after lunch. I'll be present there and you'll understand why I'm here," he releases my left wrist to caress the side of my face and then I raise my hand to do the same. *"Should I eat Marcus?"*

I pause, blinking at him. I wonder if he's testing me, seeing if what I said last night and this morning is true. But he should have seen it in my eyes, in my mind, unless this is his way of trusting me because I said that I trust him. I hope he does trust me.

"That depends, are you up for a little junk food?" I smile, and he laughs. God, his laugh sounds so human, so normal. I'm still getting used to him in this form because I'm used to the creature that I met in the sewers, the creature that I fell in love with. The creature that made love to me for the first time just last night. *"I love you."*

My expression serious now and he moves his left hand up to hold mine before pulling me upright with him. He wraps his arm around me and he tucks my hair behind my ear, looking in my eyes. *"I love you too."*

The bell rings and then I open the door to the faculty room.

"I have to go back. You should find the principal or you can roam around the school, maybe watch the other teachers and maybe you can pick-out your lunch," the students are walking in the hallway and I glance pass his arm before I look back at him. I shake my head, remembering something last minute. *"Oh, that's right. With the police investigating me, I'll need to stay at the motel for two or three days to keep my story straight. If they're going to ask me more questions, I'll need to be available."*

"Yes, of course. I'll deliver your things to your motel room, so you won't need to drop by the house. But I wouldn't worry, I overheard your conversation with the police and you were very convincing. I overheard them talking once they left and they said that your statements seemed honest. They're actually suspecting a few students, the bullies," he pauses. *"With this knowledge, I'll leave Marcus alone. I'll just...influence him with my powers to keep terrorizing the others. I've done this before."*

I nod my head in understanding, and I open the door to let him out. I step out into the hallway to watch him vanish into the sea of children and I wonder if any of them can sense that a Great White is among them. I shiver, turning to head back to my classroom to teach the next batch of students.

As Robert mentioned, an announcement is made sometime later in the day, and everyone gathers into the gym for an assembly. The teachers sit on the left side of the bleachers in the bottom left corner while the students fill the seats around us and across of us. The janitors and cafeteria staff sit on the other side, the security guards are watching the doors and some are roaming the school to make sure that everyone is present and that no one has decided to ditch school or the assembly. This is rarely done, but this announcement must be important. I'm sure it's going to regard Elliot's disappearance and why Robert is here, so I steel myself as the principal steps in front of the microphone.

"Good afternoon, Students and Staff!" he pauses, waiting for them to respond with their half-hearted good afternoons and then he continues to speak. *"As many of you must know by now, we have a visitor on our campus and I'm sure you've seen him walking in the hallways or even sitting in your classrooms. For those that haven't noticed him, you will now. Ladies and Gentlemen, give a big round of applause to Mr. Robert Gray!"*

Robert emerges from behind the bleachers and the students go from clapping to dead silence when they look at him. Oh, yes. Now they're noticing the predator in the room. His prominent forehead, piercing eyes and tall figure. A solo clap echoes out from somewhere in the gym and then the microphone statics.

"Well, on behalf of Mr. Gray, I'll be making the special announcement for him," the principal is overjoyed and he's smiling from ear-to-ear. *"He has decided to give a very generous donation to our school. The library will be extended, we're going to receive new gym equipment and the lockers in the hallways and the desks and seats in the classrooms are going to be replaced, and school-lunches are going to be improved as well."*

He claps his hands and the students begin to clap. I stare at Robert, wondering what has motivated him to do this because he kills

children. Slowly, I look at the students and I wonder if the ones that hurt him are present or if they're in another school, or if they moved away out of fear. Maybe he killed them and he didn't tell me that he did. This is something that I need to discuss with him because with these murders and disappearances still occurring, surly they're suspicious by now. God, we have so much to discuss.

"And now for a much more serious announcement. As you know, one of your classmates has been missing for two days, which explains why there were two police officers here at the school this morning. They were here to ask questions to see if anyone knows where Elliot is or where he was last seen. If you have any information at all, please, see me immediately," the principal rubs his sweaty palms together. *"Unfortunately, Elliot hasn't been the first student to disappear this year and even though one of our own students confessed to the murders, the fact that children keep disappearing is very troubling. We're afraid that there's something much larger at work."*

I look at Robert, trying to gage his reaction to hearing all of this. If he feels remorse, if he feels something that's even remotely human to what he's been doing. He's so in-tune to the fears of humans, their weakness and my desires, he must feel something.

Without having to search for me in the crowds, Robert looks right at me and I softly smile at him, telling him that 'I love him' in my thoughts. He lowers his green eyes, slightly nodding.

"Even though Mr. Gray has been out of state, he's been keeping up with what's been happening in our little town, so he's decided to honor the lives that have been lost this last year by doing something incredible," the principal places his hand on Robert's shoulder and he slightly bristles at the touch. *"Do all of you know that empty lot that's a block away? Well, he's having a baseball field built there for the students of this school to use during the weekends."*

The principal claps his hands and slightly turns to direct his applause at Robert and I slowly clap my hands along with everyone else, watching him. I have even more questions now, but they'll be answered as soon as school is over. The principal goes as far as to hug Robert, and Ms. Graham leans against my shoulder to whisper to me.

"Boy, he's sure a looker. Don't you think?" she pats my knee before straightening up.

"Yes, he is," I continue watching Robert interact with the principal and it's almost ridiculous that I'm still amazed by his ability to have a pleasant conversation with a human. But I'm not giving him enough credit. He's done this before and to be a human, he'd have to have learned what they were like and how they functioned by watching them and then interacting with them. It must have been so strange for him to take on the form of something he once described as 'less.' He still probably thinks that way, and I have no idea why a creature like him is with someone like me. Maybe I'm not giving myself enough credit.

After a few more minor announcements, like areas of the school that will be under construction first and issues with vandalism, everyone is released to attend their final period before the bell rings. Once it does, I get into my car and then I drive over to the motel.

I pause by the front desk and the man behind the counter said that he hasn't seen me for a couple of days, but I assured him that I've seen him. I tell him that I'm a night-owl and I often spend the late hours wandering the town until the streetlights turn off. He talks, and I smell alcohol on his breath, and regardless of how putrid it is, his inability to verify my presence will make things easier for me. If the police come, they'll speak to him and they probably won't believe a word he says, the poor, disorganized and drunk fool.

When I step into my motel room and the door closes behind me, I hear something drop on the floor and when I turn around, Robert is standing in the corner with my bags at his feet. I reach back to lock the door before I come to him.

My love and worship for him almost makes me forget that I have questions to ask. My expression changes before I reach him and then I place my hands on his chest.

"The donations, why did you give them?" I look in his eyes before he leads me to the bed and then I lie down on my side with him. Robert places his hand on my hip, propping his head up with his other hand.

"Happy children mean fat and care-free children. Giving them a place to frolic and have fun will keep them outside where I can easily lure them off to somewhere where they'll never return," his eyes flicker from green to gold and then back to green. "But I understand what I do to survive. I understand what it means to other humans. I'm not as...heartless as I appear to be. I don't kill more than I need and the only reason I use fear is because it's the only energy that's strong enough for me to feed on. And then there's you."

He touches the side of my face and I touch the back of his hand, wiggling a little closer to him.

"The children that hurt you before, are they still in Derry?" this is the big question. "Even if they moved away, or they moved to one of the other small towns in Maine, we should find them and kill them."

Robert slightly raises his chin at my words, the seriousness of what I want to do to ensure his safety and then he sighs before lowering his eyes to the spot between us. He picks at a stray string that's sticking out of the covers.

"All of them have moved away, except for Mike. He's living a quiet life in Etna, which isn't far from here. I don't wish to kill him because if anything, I should thank him and his friends for what they did," he explains. "I underestimated them and while I paid the price, I didn't pay the ultimate one."

His eyes grow distant when he looks out the window over my shoulder, petting my hair.

"I sleep for twenty-seven years and I am awake for one year, and this is the first time that I have ever seen change in children. Courage and unity," there's calmness in his voice, like there always is, but I look at his expression and I can't help but feel worried. What happens if, one day, humanity gets over their fears? Would he have nothing left to eat? Would he perish? He feeds off my pleasure, but I'm only one person and I can't see him finding another mate. He turns his eyes on me, reading my mind. "Humans will always be afraid because fear and uncertainty, their intuition, is what keeps some of them alive. Fear not, Tsugi. Nothing and no one will defeat me for I am eternal."

Robert's unwavering confidence makes me smile and I roll on top of him before crossing my arms on his chest. I look in his green eyes, pressing my fingertip against his jaw.

"Fine, we'll let them live, but if they come after you, we have to kill them and if you don't want to do it, then I'll kill them for you," I touch the side of his face, looking at him with worship and love. *"They would be expecting a monster or a clown, not a human."*

I softly kiss his lips and then he rolls me onto my back. Naturally, I yield to him and I slowly part my thighs, opening myself to his touch and body if he desires it. When I rest my head on the pillow, looking up at him, I wonder if he's just looking at me or if he's reading my thoughts. I can never tell because his expression rarely seems to change.

"Have you eaten anything yet?" he slowly shakes his head in response and my eyes soften. *"You should go on a hunt, and maybe, if you don't mind..."*

Dark excitement fills my chest and I didn't think that I'd ever feel thrilled about something like this before, but I'm feeling it now. I even smile.

"Can I watch you kill someone again?" I stroke the side of his face, voice soft. *"I like watching."*

He inhales loudly, searching for something with his nose, maybe the lie in my voice or the reason why I'm excited to watch someone die. Still, even now, this must be new for him. Outcast, monster, murderer, death, myth, legend. He's been called so many things, rightfully so, but to me, he's lover, protector, companion.

"Come with me," he takes my hand, pulling me up from the bed, but then I look at the door, wondering if the police are going to come by to question me. I remember what Robert said at the school, though, that I was convincing, so I leave without no further worry in my mind. At least for now.

It begins to drizzle, the sky dark as we make our way through the town and some of the shop owners are closing their businesses for the

day because they heard that a flood warning was in effect. They can only afford the minimum insurance because Derry is such a poor town with poor people, so no one wants to risk losing their business or even risk damaging their business. Sandbags are placed on the sidewalks to redirect the flow of the rainwater and runoff.

Robert holds my hand as we stroll through the town. I look at clothes while he looks at store owners, our own different version of 'window-shopping.'

Unbeknownst to us, inside of his house, Mr. Miller is staring out his kitchen window as he pours himself a cup of tea. He's been miffed for the last couple of days, details that have been troubling him. He thinks about the police officers that came to visit the school and he remembers being asked about me. He told them that we were together, but he left out the detail that he noticed me running back to my car from the woods with a ghostly white expression on my face like I had seen something that I wasn't supposed to see. He remembers the expression on my face when Robert was in the gym, standing silently beside the principle as he delivered the good news. He remembers how I looked at him and how Robert looked at me.

Questions, concerns.

Suspicion.

Mr. Miller takes his cup of tea and then he heads to his desk in the living room. He picks up a pen and then he begins to jot down things that he's noticed, things that don't quite add up about the new teacher in town and the sudden reappearance of a wealthy man and the continuation of the growing number of missing children.

9. Trouble

We walk on the streets, the perfect imitation of a human being is holding my hand, and I look at every face that passes us in a hurry to get someplace dry and warm. Maybe someplace with alcohol. They still have absolutely no idea that I'm holding hands with such immense power, that my fingers are entwined with something that's not human. Granted, while humans and animals are similar, our senses aren't the same. Animals know when something predatory is nearby. They raise their heads and flee. I look over my shoulder at the people rushing away, wondering now, if they're running from the rain or if they can sense him.

I turn to look at the man beside me and I can see no flaws in his form. How can something artificial be so perfect?

He doesn't seem to be interested in anyone that passes us, and I wonder what it is, specifically, that he searches for. Does he look for complex fears or simple fears, and does it depend on his mood for the evening? Does he have a preference? Do people that fear zombies taste different from people that fear vampires?

"We're headed to the woods," he tells me plainly as we head in that direction. We pass a bulletin-board and he has no intention of stopping, so I'm only able to catch quick glances at certain keywords. Bolded words, mostly.

Missing. Curfew. Neighborhood Watch. Abandoned the Search.

The wide branches of the trees shield us from the strengthening downpour of rain, and my attention is diverted when Robert's arm brushes against a sign and it bends in his direction from that brief moment of impact. I can't read it in time as we hurry along. He must sense that someone is nearby or the hunger is really beginning to gnaw at him. Did he really want to see me so badly that he chose me over his appetite?

We walk a long time, moving farther away from the town, and I can understand why. He scares humans before he kills them, so no one has a quiet death. This needs to happen away from the others to

avoid being heard, to avoid being found.

The beds of moss squelch underneath my bare-feet because I've abandoned my heels awhile back, knowing that I wouldn't be able to keep up if I continued to wear them. I knotted the ties together and I tossed them up in a tree to catch around the branches to dangle and collect rain. Maybe they'll make a home for two lucky birds when the water dries and the sun returns.

The rain softens into a light drizzle, but we're both already drenched, and I tug at my dress to pull it away from my skin. It just moves back, trying to conform to my shape. Finally, we stop walking and I look around us.

"There's a fisherman about two miles away, and I already know what he fears the most," he moves his hand to my upper-arm as he turns to face me. *"Keep walking straight and you'll see him. Keep your distance to avoid being seen and whatever you see that will be coming after him, it'll be me."*

I'm looking over his shoulder as he speaks to me, imagining the fisherman with his bait bobbing in the water, and when I look in his eyes, they've turned completely black. That subtle change is enough to make me tense for a moment and he takes a step back before disappearing through a twist of trees and bushes. Was he already beginning to transform into what the fisherman fears or is this some sort of symptom that occurs when he's hungry?

I begin to walk through the drenched woods, keeping an eye out for the wildlife because I don't know what kind of animals live here. I didn't bother to research that before moving, but I really should have because going from a place like New York to Maine is a big change. Instead of being surrounded by tall buildings, I'm surrounded by trees. Suddenly, I hear a branch snap, and that causes me to pause. I glance around, noting the distant song of a bird and the impact of raindrops hitting branches and leaves, but nothing more. I'm sure it's nothing, and I really have nothing to fear because Fear is in love with me. I continue to walk straight until I can hear the sound of water.

Huddled behind a tree, I can see the fisherman facing the river as he hopes for trout. He was lucky once, it seems, as I notice a trout

resting on the pebbles near his tackle-box. The fisherman adjusts his lucky hat and he reels the line in before casting it back out. Across of him, one bush rustles, but he doesn't notice it. Maybe he didn't notice it because his other surroundings are too loud. The drizzle of rain, the wind blowing through the trees, the steady flow of the river.

Through the tangle of branches and bushes, the snout of an animal appears, but not the face or the body, and it's too far away to see. That must be him. I creep out from behind the tree and then I pick up a pebble where the grass and moss ends, and I toss it at the other side in an attempt to draw his attention to it. It causes a few more pebbles to collapse down the slope and that finally catches his notice. The fisherman nudges his hat back to see across the river and after squinting his eyes, he sees a bulky figure emerge from the bushes.

A large Black Bear appears, and the fisherman's eyes widen as he drops his fishing-pole in shock. It's carried away by the flow of the water and then he trips over his tackle-box as he moves to create some distance between him and the giant animal. He fumbles for something in his pocket, presumably his car keys before he takes off running, but instead, he pulls out a small handgun.

There's no warning given this time because the Black Bear is charging and he bites down on the arm holding the gun. The fisherman exclaims and his arm is flung back, which causes him to pull the trigger. The bullet nearly finds my arm, so I take cover behind the tree in case he fires more. The Bear looks over at me before it easily bites the fisherman's fingers off to prevent him from pulling the trigger again and he moves his jaws over his mouth to muffle the sound of his terror and agony.

Curious and maybe foolish, I look around the tree again and when I see that the gun is out of reach and the victim has been claimed, I move forward to sit on the slope to watch. Part of me is still hesitant to see something so primal, but I try to find out what's making me uncomfortable about it. When we're in a crowded restaurant and we're around people that are eating because they're hungry, why doesn't that disgust us? He's eating because he's hungry too.

It's detachment, isn't it? That if it's not something that resembles us, we're able to disassociate ourselves from the situation to the point

that we don't care about it. It has no connection to us, and since we're humans, it's all about unity. We connect to create new life, we connect to bond, we connect to communicate and we connect to express. We connect because we're human.

I had friends, but I never had trouble being alone. I could go without speaking to people for days, weeks if I could. I could live alone with no pets or flowers or neighbors, and be at complete peace. Does my fondness for solitude make me less human? Possibly. Does my ability to watch a human get devoured by something that's not-human without getting sick make me less human? Maybe.

I suppose if we didn't feel compassion and mercy for our own kind, and feel guarded when another lifeform threatens us, human or not, what would prevent us from destroying each other? We're already doing it, and that's why those particular people get locked away. We remove them from society and we tell everyone "this is what will happen to you if you kill another person." But I guess you're given the green-light to kill someone if you're protecting yourself, your family and your nation. But what will happen when people no longer care about the repercussions of their actions? What will happen when no written law will stop someone from doing what they want to do? It's already happening.

The sound of a ribcage being crunched draws me out of my thoughts and then I wipe the water from my eyes to see where the Bear is now. He's almost done. Soon, we will leave this place and the only things that will be left here is the dead fish, the tackle box, and the gummy remains of what used to be a whole fisherman and his lucky hat. Come to think of it, I'll take the fish and make it for dinner.

The Bear turns to the river and thrashes his face in the water to clean the blood from it and then he turns to head up the slope to me as he transforms. Pennywise lowers his head to look in my eyes and he offers me his gloved hand.

"Come, we must leave this place," he lifts me effortlessly and drapes me over his shoulder once our palms touch.

We vanish into the darkness of the underground together until we emerge from the well to stand in the dusty basement. Pennywise lifts

my chin with his fingertips, turns my face from side to side, and he checks me for scratches that weren't made by him. I'm decent for tumbling through the woods, even though my unkempt hair and muddy feet don't seem to agree. He lowers his golden eyes to the fish in my hand and he raises an eyebrow.

"Dinner," I shrug my shoulders and he inclines his head before heading up the stairs to the main floor of the house. He vanishes around the corner before I'm able to see where he's going, but I hear the jingle of a bell in the kitchen.

When I enter the room, he's sitting on his haunches in the corner to watch me, and a cutting board is set on the table, a knife beside it. That's both adorable and menacing at the same time. I wash my hands at the sink once the fish is place down on the board and then I open a cabinet to look at the spices. I've managed to buy some not too long ago, but there's nothing here that I want. My heels lift off the ground as I reach for the second to the top shelf, wondering how old the spices there are. They were here before me, but spices usually tend to last for years.

"What are you looking for?" Pennywise's voice comes from over my shoulder and then I set my feet flat before turning around. For someone so large, he certainly can be stealthy when he wants to be. He sniffs my face and hair, and I close my eyes.

"Rosemary, white pepper and dill weed. It's for the fish," I open my eyes and I tilt my face up to look at him. "I need to go to the market, but I'll be right back."

He reaches up to grab something off one of the shelves, and he places it on the counter near the stove. I look down at the label.

Nutmeg.

Slowly, I look back up at him and then I blink my eyes, trying my best not to laugh. He grunts, making the sound of an impatient bull, and he steps back to allow me to leave. My palm brushes against his collar and then I touch his cheek.

"I'm going to head upstairs to wash my feet and put on some dry clothes

and then I'll head to the market. I hope they'll still be open," I alert him as I head upstairs to change out of my dirty clothes.

Nineteen minutes later, I return downstairs and he's nowhere to be found, not in the kitchen or the living room. I knock on the wall three times, telling him that wherever he is: I love him. I shoulder my purse and then I head outside to begin my walk to town to fetch some spices. It's getting late, muggy for this time of year, and the insects are buzzing in the air. I think about the spices that were missing and I'm wondering if I should have made a list. There are probably other things that I should purchase too, but I guess there's always next time. The last thing I want is to keep my love waiting.

Not far from the market, there's a rustling sound coming from the bushes near the pond. I pause, wondering if it's a stray cat or a stray dog, maybe some ducks drying off from their swim. Maybe it's... I sigh, not the least bit annoyed that he decided to follow me. He's gotten into the habit of doing that since we met.

"Penny..." I begin, but then someone else emerges from the bushes. *"Mr. Miller? What... What a surprise."*

I feel the way a mouse does when it sees the shadow of a hawk overhead, the cold and unpleasant feeling of dread fills my veins, and my mind races too quickly to think of something to say, something that should explain the reason why I'm on my way to buy spices from the market as if I needed an excuse.

"Were you expecting someone else, Miss Hayashi?" he pinches some broken twigs off his sleeve before he steps onto the sidewalk beside me. He smiles, but there's something different about it this time.

"No, I wasn't, but I thought that you were someone else," his sudden presence has made me uneasy, so I politely bow at him before I glance ahead of me. *"Unfortunately, I don't really have time to chat. I have to purchase some spices before the market closes. Excuse me."*

I start to walk away from him.

"Did you think I was Pennywise?" I stop walking and then I slowly turn on my heel to look at him. *"Or does he go by his other name? What was*

it? Oh, yes, Robert. The next time you see him, I hope you'll thank him for his generous donation that he made for the school."

I'm flabbergasted, almost stunned into silence. But I have to respond. How, though? What can I possibly say to something like that? He sounds so certain of himself for me to attempt to lie to him, but maybe his confidence isn't what it appears to be.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Miller," his smile doesn't falter, while mine has faded a long time ago. He comes closer until he brushes my hair away from my shoulder to reveal the corner of the bite mark that Pennywise left on me.

"I think you do, Tsugi, and if you want me to keep quiet about this and not go running to the police this very second, I'd like you to come home with me. I want you to see something," he grabs the back of my upper arm and he begins to guide me to his home, and his grip only loosens when a few people pass us on the street. I can't bear to look at them.

Once we reach his front porch, he unlocks the door and pushes it open. He gestures for me to walk inside first, and I feel like walking into his home would be the most foolish thing that I've ever done and will ever do, but it's obvious that he knows something. If he knows something, then someone else might know something too. I need to see what roused his suspicion.

Mr. Miller shuts and locks the door behind him, and I can see that his living room has been turned into a paper shrine. There are articles pinned to the walls, pages torn from history books, blurry pictures of 'someone' that I wish I didn't recognize, dates of events that happened before the two of us were even born.

"For a while, I thought you were one of his puppets, a victim that he threatened to kill if you didn't do exactly what he wanted you to do," Mr. Miller speaks as I stare at the walls, feeling helpless. *"But then I thought about it, and the pieces started to come together. You're new in town and then all of a sudden, a child goes missing from your class. Later, three more children go missing, and a man was found dead near a bar that you were seen at. It struck me then. You're not a victim or a puppet. You're this thing's lover, aren't you?"*

I feel cold, but part of me is holding out hope that the room will suddenly darken, and Mr. Miller will turn around to see Pennywise towering over him before he dies. The lamp on his desk is bright.

Mr. Miller approaches me from behind and then he looks at the collection of blurry pictures on the wall near the corner. He rips one off its pin before holding it up to my face.

"Do you see this picture? It was taken fifty-four years ago. I have a friend in the next town fix the picture for me, enhance the quality," he's looking at me, but I can't look at him. I stare into the black and white eyes of the portrait being held up in front of me, wishing to God that he'd jump right out of the paper and become real. *"I thought you'd be happy to see him, seeing as how he hasn't aged, but I guess since you saw the same man standing in the gym earlier, there's no reason for you to be overly happy."*

Can Pennywise not sense my distress? I close my eyes, realizing that he's trusted me to always return to him and he wants me to maintain my free will and freedom, so he's not reading my every thought, even when we're apart from each other. Would I be able to summon him? If I screamed his name, would he come?

I've brought so much difficulty into his life, so much confusion. What the hell can I do now?

"What do you want from me?" it's a question that I don't want answered because I already know what it is. Mr. Miller has been polite since I met him, but he has information that could unearth all the roots that Pennywise has spent so much time nurturing. He would be hunted, wounded, or even killed. And the option to kill Mr. Miller, while it seems like the simplest solution, would only raise more suspicion. He's been seen speaking to me a lot during the last few days. The police would question me, search his home, and they'd find something. All it takes is one scrap of paper. People saw us walking to his house together too.

The three missing boys, the hunter in the woods yet to be found, the man from the bar, the student from my class, and all the other people that went missing within the last few weeks add up. There are too many unexplained deaths, too many disappearances, and too many

unanswered questions.

"*You know what I want from you,*" one question is answered, though.

Yet, I'm still trying to figure a way out of this, even now that I feel his lips on my neck. My body doesn't know these lips. His hands are strangers to me, gloveless. His skin is humanly tan, not unearthly white. I glance down at the letter opener on the table behind Mr. Miller, considering it.

Fingerprints, strands of my hair, witnesses. The consideration has passed.

Once again, how much am I willing to sacrifice to protect the Beast of Derry? This has always been my biggest fear, being dishonored in this way. It has been my only true fear, and even a creature like Pennywise, if he looked that deeply at all, would not do such a thing to me because even he has his own set of morals. It makes him a better 'human' than most of the people that I've met in my life, most of the people that I will meet in my life.

But this is just a body. This isn't my heart or mind, and while I'm completely aware that he's not after either of those two things, the body will always heal itself. It's the mind that makes the body believe that the damage is permanent. I can do this.

I walk down his hallway, removing the satisfaction of having him lead me there like a poor master leading a rich slave, and before I step into his bedroom, I turn to look at him.

"*How do I know you'll keep your word?*" it's a question that I don't want Mr. Miller to answer because the answer seems obvious. He could go straight to the police right after this with the evidence, and they'll either laugh at him or take him seriously. I can't gamble when it comes to what their reaction will be, and the risk is too high to decline his nefarious desire.

"*I don't have any family members that live here, Tsugi. I don't have any kids. The school doesn't pay me enough to really care. I don't give a shit about what the two of you do. All I'm interested is what you have to offer me once this door closes,*" his voice makes me nauseous because it

brings me slightly relief, but there's still that gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach that he could turn my whole world upside down if he wanted to.

He has power over me for now, but not for long. That's what I'd like to tell myself, and with that thought, the bedroom door closes behind me.

I don't know how much time passes, but I emerge from his house and before the door completely closes, I hear Mr. Miller pulling some of the papers down from the wall. I don't know if he's reorganizing his findings or if he's going to file them away or if he's getting ready to submit them anonymously to the police. I don't know.

What I do know is that I feel dirty and livid, worried more than anything. I look around to see that everything has darkened again, and I look up to see that the moon is out. A Waxing Gibbous. I blink for a moment, signals in my brain firing at each other, and I turn around to head up the steps of Mr. Miller's front porch. I push his front door open and then as he turns around, I grab the folder of papers from his hand.

"I'm taking this. I don't care what's in the folder, I don't care if you've sent emails, stored copies in your computer, but I'm taking this. Your word? It means nothing to me. If I have this, at least, I will not leave your house empty-handed," without waiting for him to say something, I storm out and I stuff the folder into my purse as I make my way back home.

The moment I return, I hear bells jingle in the kitchen, and Pennywise emerges in the doorway. He stares at me and then he glances at the clock on the wall near the stairs. He has never had working clocks before. Time has no importance to something like him, but he knows that it means something to me, whether I wish it to or not. He begins to approach me, and I immediately hold up my hand.

"Please, don't come any closer," I want him to hold me, but at the same time, I don't want to be touched by anyone right now. I don't want him to smell me and notice that someone else's scent is on my skin. I want to take a shower, wash it all away, and I want to sleep. Falling asleep means that tonight will be over, and a new day will start. That

day will pass and then it will be two days since this horribleness occurred. Soon, a week will have gone by. After that, a month and then, eventually, a year. Yes, time is important to me. *"I'm sorry that I'm late. The market was already closed, but I got distracted by the moon. It... It reminded me of you."*

"Something about you smells...different, Tsugi," his voice is slightly deep from restrained anger, and I comb my fingers through my hair. *"I sense that there is something that you are not telling me. Shall I read your mind?"*

Panic makes my veins tremble, frustration makes me nauseous again, and my eyebrows furrow when I meet his eyes to see a little red swim through the gold.

"If you love me, you'll respect my privacy. I told you that I got distracted. I'm home now. I just want to shower and sleep, if that's fine with you," he flexes his claws, but I don't look at his hands to show that I notice his agitation. Please, just let me go.

He snarls and claws the wall before he vanishes into the basement, and I close my eyes when I hear him charge down the stairs to disappear down the well. Tears outline my eyelids and then my lips tremble before I find the energy to head upstairs to the bathroom. My clothes are stuffed into a trash bag and then I step into the hot shower to scrub my skin raw. I wash every inch of my body twice, wincing with each harsh movement, and I wash my hair twice. Once I feel clean enough, I wrap myself in a towel and then I open the medicine cabinet to swallow some painkillers and some form of amoxicillin. I spray myself and the bathroom with some perfume, and I step into the hallway to find that it's empty. I don't expect Pennywise to be sleeping with me tonight. I don't expect to sleep at all tonight.

I head to the master bedroom to get dressed, but instead of getting dressed in my normal nightgown or pajamas, I get dressed in jeans and a long-sleeve flannel shirt. I want to feel completely covered tonight. Slowly, I lie down on my side of the bed, still leaving his side open for him, and I look at the moonlight shining through the limbs of the tree outside. A Waxing Gibbous in all its glory.

My mind focuses on the silver light, the way that it makes some of the weaker leaves transparent enough to see their veins, and I think about the tree outside of Mr. Miller's window. Our tree looks better, much better, even though it's half-dead.

My mind drifts, and I wonder if Pennywise read my mind and he knows what happened. I wonder if he left because he didn't know how to handle it or that he was offended that I let someone else touch me the way that he does, even if it wasn't consensual, or maybe he paid Mr. Miller a visit. Does he know why? Does he care?

My mind grows weary, and I can no longer stay awake, which is probably for the best.